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LOVE STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

RANCH ROMANCES

A CLAYTON MAGAZINE

Maid of the Valley

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Second January Number

20c

IN CANADA 25c

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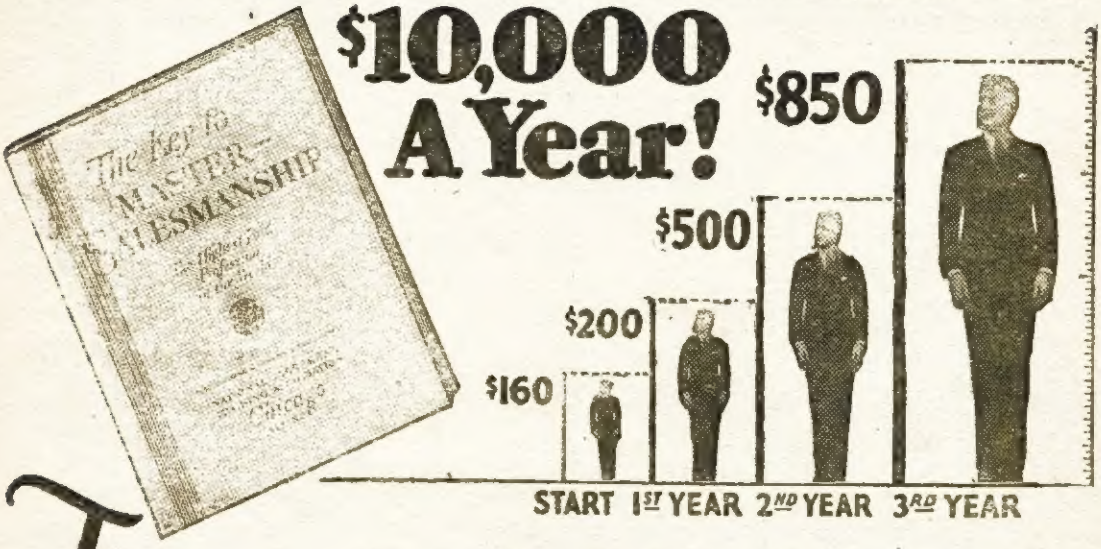

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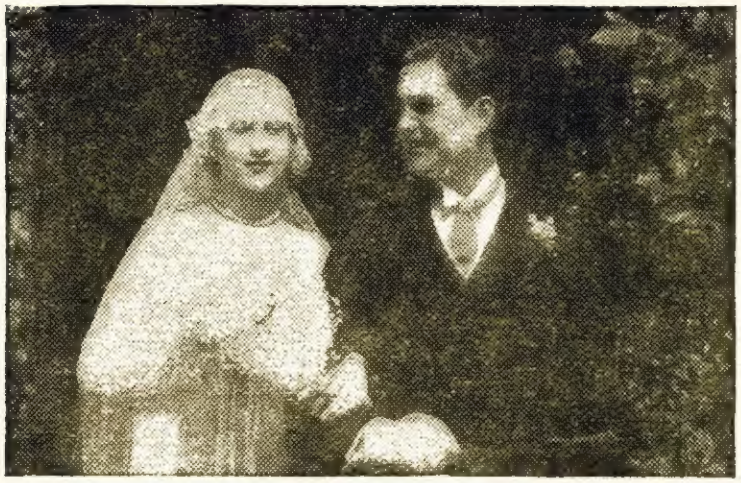

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Maid of the Valley

By Victor Rousseau

Standing steadfast against the sweeping tides of conquest in a valley of the untamed West, this dainty girl defended with her guns a lovely bit of country which she thought her own, until a tall rider came down to claim it. Would he, too, fight this glorious girl of the rangeland, or would he throw himself into the battle for her sake?

CHAPTER I

The Intruder

ALTO VERDE sprawled like a great octopus in the dust and sunlight. It was not that it was any larger than the average Border cowtown that is situated a hundred miles from the nearest railroad. It was the way the town lay that conveyed the idea of size—squat in the middle of the plain, with tentacles consisting of adobe buildings extending on every side of it.

Squalid, unkempt, and dusty, Alto Verde had the aspect of all cowtowns in the dull season. It might have been a moulting vulture, squatting there in the alkali.

Vulture or octopus, according to one's fancy. To Jim Trevor it possessed a charm, a wonder, that no other place on earth could hold for him. Not the town, perhaps, but the wide range, extending to the mesquite-clad slopes of the distant Guadalupes. For it meant home to him.

His heart beat faster as he reined in on the ridge and looked down. The pinto that he rode, unusually large for a horse of his breed, was plastered white with sweat and alkali, so that its color was barely discernible.

The rider himself was equally travel

stained. Alkali dust coated his shirt and leather chaps, and the sweat from his forehead had carved little furrows down his cheeks. Twenty-five or six, he looked, until one saw the little fine lines radiating from the corners of his eyes, and then one would have guessed thirty.

Both guesses would have been wrong. Jim Trevor was twenty-four, and he was returning to the place of his birth after eight years in the Chilean Andes.

He reined in and studied the scene before him with a puzzled expression.

Alto Verde hadn't changed in any essential way since he had been away, so far as he could see.

There were the stretches of green range, watered by the Penasco, the sage flats behind them, and the mesquite lands. But in the neck of the pass leading into the rangelands was a line of curious structures, and Jim studied them for two or three whole minutes before he was able to make out what they were.

"Oil derricks!" he exclaimed, with such suddenness that the pinto, which had been trying to snatch a few mouthfuls of succulent herbage by the wayside, swerved. "That's what Dad thought he'd lost his money in. He'll be plumb tickled when he learns I held on to it, and sold it for twice what he gave for it when I landed in New York."

Jim drew a crumpled letter from his pocket, addressed to him in Chile, and reread a part of it.

> —Well, Jim, I guess you and me were plumb foolish to quarrel, and I'm realizing it more than ever since your mother died. And I'd be glad to see you home, Jim, but I've got to tell you I've been a worse fool than that.
>
> Lem Cleaver, the banker, organized a company six months ago to drill for oil, which they claimed had been found in the Penasco Valley. Zeb Handley, Eph Logan, and Wallie Knight and John Houston all took shares, but it was John Clouston got around me to put all I'd got into it. He told me we'd be millionaires for sure. Well, last month the company went busted, and they tell me them shares are good for nothing more than shin plasters.
>
> I'm plumb discouraged, Jim, when I think I've got nothing to leave you. The ranch is mortgaged, but I'm hanging on. And I'm enclosing them shares, because I've heard of cases where worthless shares has come back and brought in millions, but I don't feel like I'll be here to see that day.

There was a stern, drawn look on Jim's face as he folded up the letter and replaced it in his pocket. He had not received it until eight months after it was written. It had reached him in the heart of the Andes, and he had sailed for America immediately. And he had disposed of those shares in New York at a profit sufficient to relieve all his father's difficulties.

He strained his eyes against the blazing sun, trying to pierce the gap that led into the ranges, but saw only a blur. He climbed into the saddle and gathered up the reins, giving the pinto a kick that sent him pirouetting.

A mile farther on he struck a side trail that ran in the direction of the pass. Now he could plainly see the line of oil derricks that he had noticed from the top of the rise. Half hidden under the ridge behind them was a row of shacks such as are built to accommodate a gang of laborers.

But the shacks were empty and falling to pieces, and the derricks were not in much better shape. They were of the flimsiest construction, too, as if built only for temporary use.

Four uprights were held in position by braces, resting on clumsy wooden sills, and these had sunk into the ground under the weight of the superstructure, so that each derrick was more or less askew, and looked as if a substantial push would topple it over.

Links, sinker bar, and auger stem still hung suspended from the rotting manila rope, but the whole apparatus was falling into decay and rust, like the sand pumps and boilers.

Jim looked at the derricks in perplexity. All were in similar condition; it seemed certain that the whole enterprise had been either a wildcat scheme or a plain fraud. And yet, in the face of these abandoned derricks, how came

it that the almost worthless stock had sustained so spectacular a rise within the past few days?

He would soon know, for now the pass lay behind him, and in front of him lay miles of range, the freedom of the wide spaces that he remembered from his earliest days.

There was the Penasco, crystal clear and unsullied; the range grass, emerald green; the mesquite lands; and the shadowy Guadalupes beyond. Jim drew in great chestfuls of air as he rode on. There was Zeb Handley's land, to the right, and Eph Logan's behind it. But Jim was on his home range now, and in a few minutes he would see the ranch house, nestling snugly among its cottonwoods.

But where were the steers that should have been fattening on the rich grass? And why was a great patch of poison larkspur, something his father had rooted out the moment it appeared, growing here? This patch was in flower, must have been there for months.

Thank God, there was the ranch house! Jim drove his horse hard, a nameless fear gradually growing as something told him of impending catastrophe. In the distance were a few cattle. But there were only two horses in the saddle stock corral, and the bunkhouse looked deserted.

Jim splashed through the stream and up to the door of the house, with its strangely shuttered windows. He rang the bell, which jangled wildly, like peals of laughter.

Then a girl stood in the entrance, confronting him. A girl with a belt about her waist, and a holster attached to it, and a revolver butt protruding from the holster, and slim fingers close to that butt. Jim noticed these things before he saw that her hair was a sunny gold, and that her gray eyes were ablaze with anger.

"What do you want here?" Her voice was vibrant.

"This range is private—didn't you see the notice board? I've given warning that I'll shoot if I'm molested, and that includes you!"

Jim gazed at her speechlessly. Who was she? What was she doing in his father's house, which was still his own home?

"Might I ask whose ranch this is?" he inquired at length, with mild sarcasm that was entirely lost upon the girl.

"You may! It's Miss Clouston's, Ray Clouston's. That is to say, it's mine. And it's going to remain mine as long as the law permits it to."

Ray Clouston! John Clouston's daughter! Jim knew her now. But those eight years had worked great changes in her as well as in himself. If he had failed to recognize in her the long-limbed girl with whom he had been acquainted years ago—eleven years ago, before her father sent her to boarding school—small wonder that she had not known him!

But this ranch hers? The realization of the need for caution kept Jim from disclosing his identity.

"I had an idea this ranch belonged to someone else," he answered mildly. "Fellow named Trevor."

"You thought that, did you? Well, you're out of date with your information, if you really thought so. Luke Trevor died six months ago, and this ranch is mine. So that's that. And I'll ask you to go." Again that ominous play of fingers on gun butt.

But Jim was hardly conscious of the girl any longer. The words had been like several stabs in the brain, stabs of intense physical anguish. His father dead! Ray Clouston in possession! Then her father must be dead, too! Jim only stared at her dumbly.

"So you can go back to Mr. Flannery, or whoever sent you here, and tell him you've found out who owns this ranch," the girl was saying. "Ride back, hombre, the way you came!"

There was nothing more to be said, unless he chose to tell her who he was. He got into the saddle, wheeled his horse, and rode back toward Alto

Verde. He would learn more in time. And he had learned how to be patient.

BUT Alto Verde had changed after all. Jim saw that as he approached the town again. He had left it a settlement of frame and adobe; he was riding into a conglomeration of stores with false fronts, and shacks that had sprung up everywhere. And there was a business block, the lower story of brick, the upper one of wood. Lem Cleaver, the banker, occupied the center of it, and there were the names of lawyers and cattle dealers in gold letters upon the windows.

On the left, about halfway down the long street, was a gaudy honkatonk, whose mere presence showed the change that had taken place since Jim's departure. In his time, the population of hard-working ranchmen would neither have patronized nor have tolerated the presence of such a place.

Yet there it stood, a big frame building, with a dance hall and a saloon, and rooms above, and, upon a shingle, as well as framed in electric light bulbs about the doorway, the name Paradise House, Tom Baines, Proprietor.

Four horses, hitched to the rack in front, seemed the only animate things in Alto Verde.

Jim dismounted and led his horse around to the water tank in the rear; then, when the pinto had satisfied his thirst, brought him back to the rack and fastened him, after which he went inside.

He guessed that he would get more information here than by accosting Lem Cleaver, and he knew Tom Baines, a small nester who had borne a bad reputation in the district eight years before, having been suspected of replenishing his herd by rustling unbranded mavericks from neighboring ranges.

If Tom Baines failed to recognize him, it was not likely that anyone would, since Baines had more than once come to Luke Trevor for aid in his difficulties. And more and more Jim was coming to realize the need of caution.

Inside the saloon the shades were drawn, throwing the place into obscurity. A group of hard-featured men were lined up at the bar. Behind it Baines was standing, and Jim recognized him instantly.

The ex-nester had grown stout and bald, his red thatch, where any remained, had grizzled; he wore a dirty white apron around his obese body, and the indifferent look he turned on Jim was that which one gives to a complete stranger.

At the farther end of the bar was a young man with a pallid, dissipated face, engaged in wiping glasses with a damp rag. Jim recognized him, too, immediately. His name was Lew Tunnery, and in the old days his father had been the town wastrel.

Father and son had been jailed more than once for petty thefts, and so far as appearance went, Lew, with his dissipated face and flashy tie pin, had not improved in the years that had passed.

As Jim entered, Lew looked up, stared hard at him, and fell to his polishing again. Jim advanced to the bar, and Tom Baines leaned forward, hands imprinting patterns on the wet surface. No, Jim was positive that the hotel man did not know him.

"Well, stranger, what's yores?"

"Anything long and soft," said Jim, laying down a bill upon the bar.

"And soft, did you say?" demanded Baines with a grin, while the hard-featured group turned and surveyed the newcomer. "That's an ask we don't often git here, stranger. Alto Verde is runnin' wide open, and Sheriff White's a reg'lar feller."

"Well, now, I ain't a drinkin' man in daylight hours," grinned Jim, adapting himself to the company.

Tom Baines winked at him. "Drinkin' and business don't mix, hey, feller?" he asked. "If it ain't takin' a liberty, might I ax if you happen to come from Xavier?"

"Well, it would be what you might

call a windin' trail that would bring a feller to this burg without his passin' through Xavier," responded Jim, assuming a cryptic manner, as he raised the glass of lemon pop to his lips.

"You're what they call a wisecracker, ain't you, stranger?" asked the barkeep, while the crowd guffawed. "Well, it takes all kinds to make a world, they say!"

Jim glanced at the crowd along the bar. If ever the stamp of the criminal was imprinted on the faces of a crowd, it was stamped indelibly on these.

All these men wore six-guns prominently displayed, two or three showed a second weapon; their holsters, swung low down upon their hips, were mostly of the half-breed variety.

Then of a sudden Jim caught sight of his reflection in the big mirror behind the bar, and realized that in appearance there was no difference between these men and himself. He was, if anything, still dirtier and more ruffianly in aspect, and any signs of grace upon his countenace were effectively smothered in a plaster of alkali.

"Calc'latin' stayin' in Alto Verde?" pursued the hotel man; and the crowd pricked up its ears to hear Jim's answer.

"Jest as long as my business lasts," answered Jim. "Want to know anything more?"

Tom Baines guffawed. "Naw, reckon you've said enough, feller," he answered.

"Thought that you was one of us, but aimed to make sure. Meet some of the boys. Scotty, Al, Red, shake with yore new pard. What's yore name? Jim? Well, that's easy.

"But"—Baines leaned confidentially across the bar—"you've got to see Mr. Flannery, and he won't be back till evenin'. You be around here at nine o'clock to-night, and he'll fix up things with you. Guess you'll want a room to wash up in."

"I'll want a room," said Jim. "Jest now, however, I guess I'll stroll around some and look at the town."

CHAPTER II

Old Friends

ALTO VERDE was already beginning to awaken from its noon siesta. Storekeepers could be seen standing in the doors of their shops, little groups and clusters of men appeared, conversing on shady stoops or in byways. Down the street an elderly man whose burro had been loaded up with goods was fastening the load with a diamond hitch binding.

Yes, Alto Verde had changed! Instead of the pleasant, smiling faces of old, the same hard-featured, tight-lipped men stalked the streets, and Jim could see that, as a newcomer, he was the subject of general study. Here and there, in the doorway of a store, was an old-timer whom Jim had known in the past, and who continued to stare at him with complete lack of recognition.

Jim was now abreast of the old man with the burro. He recognized him as Tom Knowles, formerly a factotum on his father's ranch. Tom had been with Luke Trevor for years, but, lacking cow sense, had been retained for general household jobs, message-riding, etc. The storekeeper, also an old-timer, a stout, seedy-looking man named Marsh, had formerly been one of Alto Verde's most prosperous merchants.

"Say, Mr. Marsh, you fergot to put in that lump of rock salt fer the burro," said Tom Knowles, as he completed the diamond hitch.

"Sure, that's so," answered Marsh. "I put her down inside somewhar." The two elderly men went inside the store. At sight of them, an uncontrollable desire to learn the details of his father's death and bankruptcy took possession of Jim. He followed them inside, still uncertain whether or not to make himself known.

At his entrance, Marsh looked up from the low shelf on which he had laid the lump of salt. Fear and hate were in his eyes.

"What kin I do for you, stranger?" he asked, in a voice that was almost a

snarl. "If you've come about that contribution to Flannery's election fund—"

"No, ain't come about any contribution," answered Jim. Then, his pent-up feelings suddenly getting the better of him, "Mr. Marsh, don't you know me? Nor you, Tom?"

In the subdued light of the store the two old men peered into his eyes. It was to Tom Knowles that recognition came first.

"Jim—it's Jim Trevor!" he exclaimed in terror.

"Jim Trevor!" Marsh's jaw fell. "Shet and bolt that door, Tom!" he commanded, and old Tom hastened to obey, leaving the laden burro standing patiently outside.

"Aimin' to hold me?" asked Jim, smiling.

"Jim Trevor!" gasped Marsh. "Whar you come from, Jim? How long you been away?"

"Eight years," Jim answered. "Yeah, you mean I've changed. Folks don't recognize me—"

"I mean," said Marsh, "when was you last in Alto Verde? The very last time?"

"Eight years ago, I'm tellin' you. Why?"

"I knowed it, Tom," said Marsh to old Knowles, with an air of deep relief.

"Knew what, Mr. Marsh?"

"Knowed that you hadn't been back since, like some folks say."

"Nope, ain't set foot in Alto Verde since I quit years ago," said Jim. "Rode in about noon, and made for my dad's ranch, expectin' him to kill the fatted calf for the prodigal son, after eight years in South America. I found Miss Ray Clouston at the house, and she said how my dad died six months ago, and the ranch was hers. Sort of a haymaker for me. I just rode away. Didn't tell her who I was nor anything.

"She called me one of Flannery's men. Who in heck is this Flannery anyways? But first, about my dad. I saw you two standin' outside here, and I said I'd get the truth from Tom Knowles and Mr. Marsh, if I'd get it anywhere."

"You don't know—nothin'?" Marsh was only just beginning to regain his composure. "Set down on that bag of corn, Jim. I dunno whar to begin, thar's so darned much of it.

"You see, Jim, everybody was prosperin' in the Penasco Valley until them oil speculators started drillin', and then some of the ranchers went plumb crazy. It was John Clouston got yore dad to invest his savin's—and then the whole scheme went blooey. Clouston was hit hard, but yore dad lost most everything, and that made bad feelin' between 'em.

"Six months ago yore dad died unexpected, dropped dead ridin' back from town. Banker Cleaver held an overdue mortgage on the ranch, and yore dad didn't leave a dollar. So Clouston took it over on a six months' option, expectin' to run a whole raft of steers and make good his losses on the fall sales. But he died a month later of pneumony, and Miss Ray's been carryin' on ever since. That's how."

"I see," said Jim. He was thinking of the sudden rise in the value of the oil shares, but he decided to say nothing about that to Marsh. The twenty-five thousand dollars that the sale of his lot had brought him represented only a minority of his actual capital. Jim Trevor had turned those eight years in South America to very good advantage.

"And so there's no oil in the valley?" he asked the storekeeper.

It was old Tom Knowles who answered him. "Ile?" he shouted. "The whole valley's soaked in ile! Them crooks drilled jest so far and no farther, knowin' that it only needed a single lump of iron, which we call a go-devil, dropped down the well on top of a can of nitroglycerine, to start the gusher. Yeah, I ain't blind. I've studied them fake wells they dug. One can of nitro and a go-devil'll start most any of 'em spoutin'. They got my savin's, too. But I'll get them. I'll get them!"

Marsh gave him a pitying look. "Yeah, we know that, Tom," he answered. "It's true what Tom was tellin' you, Jim," he continued. "Thar's oil enough to burn for years all through the valley.

"The idea was to git them ranchers to take stock, and then to give out there warn't no oil. Arter they got them fellers busted, specially yore dad, who'd leased 'em the land, they'd force them to sell out. They'd git the land, and buy in the oil stock for a song, and then start operatin'."

"Smart trick. Sounds like Lem Carver," said Jim.

"Yeah, but that ain't all by any means. Yuh know, Alto Verde's allus been more or less a law to itself, sitooated down here miles from nowhar, and them fellers was playin' for big stakes. And if trouble was to arise, thar'd be an investigation, which didn't suit Lem Cleaver and his crowd.

"So they brung in that crook Flannery, who's got a tough record in Chicago, and he come with a gang of toughs, and built Paradise House, and the miners and punchers come from miles around to drink and gamble, and dance with that bunch of Mex girls. Flannery's made Alto Verde a hell hole, and drove out all the decent folks.

"They bled me white for contributions to the Citizens' Committee, and so forth, aimin' to drive me out of town . When I saw you come in, I sure thought you was another of Flannery's crowd. He's gittin' in a fresh bunch of toughs to keep the town under when the oil company starts operatin' again, and the town learns how it's been fooled."

"Yeah, I see how things stand," said Jim. "But how come they let Clouston buy my dad's ranch, if they wanted to git it in their own hands?"

Marsh grinned wryly. "Well, you see, Jim, that cur, Lem Cleaver, reckoned he might as well git Clouston's money and then drive him out, too. Flannery's gang's in touch with a crowd of rustlers that's been operatin' steady, runnin' off Miss Ray's stock till she's purty near the end, I reckon. I hear the six months has already run out, so that leaves only the little fellers like Eph Logan, Zeb Handley, and Wallie Knight."

"Why doesn't the whole crowd stand together?" asked Jim.

"Shucks, you know what human natur' is, Jim," answered the storekeeper. "Them three fellers has spent their hull lives workin' up their ranches, and Flannery's left 'em alone. The oil ain't on their land, and they can't afford to buck Flannery and his crew. They hope that Flannery won't go after them when he's finished with Miss Ray."

"One at a time—that's a good way," said Jim. "And what have you been doin', Tom, since my dad died?" he asked Tom Knowles.

"Me? I got a little shack out in the mesquite lands, and I'm prospectin' thar," answered Tom. "I got an idea thar's oil thar. And thar's somethin' besides oil. It's on that trail them rustlers take when they go to drive off Miss Ray's steers. And I'm keepin' my eye open fer them."

Jim nodded. "Well, Mr. Marsh, I'm sure obliged to you for what you told me," he said.

"But what you calc'latin' on doin', Jim?" asked the storekeeper anxiously.

"Well, seein' I only got in this afternoon, I haven't had much time to make plans," answered Jim evasively.

"You—you ain't told nobody who you are, exceptin' me and Tom?"

"Not yet. And ain't aimin' to. Looks like I'll have a heap more fun with Flannery by keepin' my identity to myself for a while."

"Listen, Jim," pleaded the storekeeper, laying a hand on Jim's arm. "I told you how, in return fer wisin' you up to the sitooation, I was goin' to ax somethin' of you in return."

"Bit of advice, you called it."

"Yeah, put it that way. I want you fer to keep out of Alto Verde fer the present."

"How come?" demanded Jim. "I

don't just see, even if the town gets wise to me, how that's a reason why I should keep hid. Meanin' this Flannery's such a terrible feller, I got to be afraid of him and his gunmen?"

The two old men exchanged significant looks again. Dimly, Jim felt that there was something they had not yet told him, something that bore vitally upon the situation. But he was in no mood to ask further questions. He had learned all he needed to know immediately.

"Not exactly that, Jim. I'm jest advisin' you," Marsh parried. "Listen, Jim," he continued earnestly, "you go back with Tom Knowles to his shack in the mesquite lands. Ain't more'n seven or eight miles from here, and you can lay up thar and rest a while ontil you git a better grip on things, and decide what you want to do."

"Meanin' till I see the light, huh?" snapped Jim. "Marsh, you either got me wrong, or you forgot how I used to be.

"Not a thing doin' along those lines, Marsh. I dunno myself just what line I'm goin' to take, but for the present, I'm stayin' in Alto Verde, registerin' under my mother's name of Strange. And I'm trustin' you two fellows to forget you seen Jim Trevor. That's all."

He strode out of the store. A breath of air came fanning out of the west. The sun was low in the sky, and it was growing cool. Jim stood for a moment in the entrance of Marsh's store, taking in the familiar scene. Then he turned to make his way back to the Paradise House.

But old Tom Knowles came hobbling out after him. "Jim, thar's somethin' I got to tell you," he began. "Good reason why you oughter come back with me right away. It concerns yore dad."

"My dad?" Jim swung upon him, sudden suspicion in his face. Was this the thing that they had been concealing from him? "Yeah? You mean somethin' about his dyin'?"

"His body was found halfway between the ranch and town. It was me and another feller found him—Jack Wallis. They drove Jack out of town."

"Yeah, go on!" said Jim in a harsh whisper.

"It wasn't his heart, like the doc purtended at the inquest. I didn't dare say a word, Jim. Flannery sent me notice what'd happen to me if I did. Yore dad had been shot dead. Thar was a bullet wound clean through his heart."

Jim staggered backward. His eyes became pin points of agate, blazed with such anger that old Tom Knowles shrank away from him in terror.

"Yeah? And you think—?" Suddenly he sprang forward and seized the old man by the shoulders. "I've had enough of these tricks and evasions, Tom Knowles," he said. "I want to know who you think killed him. If it was Flannery—"

"Folks said—" stammered old Tom.

"Never mind what folks said. I'm askin' what *you* think—or know!"

"I—dunno nothin'. I ain't goin' to say I think it was any feller when I dunno!"

"Clouston! John Clouston! God!" Jim released old Tom, and stepped back, his face convulsed with dreadful, mirthless laughter. "And you're askin' me to run away from Alto Verde, and—hide!"

He swung around and strode fiercely down the street in the direction of the Paradise House, while Marsh, from the doorway, and Tom Knowles, beside his burro, looked after him in dismay and terror.

CHAPTER III

Flannery

LUKE TREVOR had been a hard-working, steady-going ranchman from Colorado, who had been one of the first settlers in the Penasco Valley, and had acquired the largest holding there.

These holdings included mesquite land, which was, of course, worthless

for grazing, but in all he had a domain that embraced a good number of square miles. To build up a home, to have a place secure against the changes of fortune, was everything in life, in Luke Trevor's opinion.

Perhaps he had been unduly harsh with Jim when the boy evinced a desire to see something of the world before settling down to ranch life. The quarrel that finally broke had been a bitter one.

In the presence of witnesses Luke Trevor had threatened his son with punishment, and Jim had uttered wild threats in return, should his father lay hands on him. Then he had stamped out of the house and had not returned.

Jim's mother lived for five years afterward, but she was destined not to see her son again in this life. Through her efforts, peace had come about, and Luke Trevor had sent his son various sums of money during those first years of his absence, until he had made good with a mining company in South America, later branching out for himself.

There had been faults on both sides, and it had been Jim's eager hope that he would be able to atone for his share in the past by placing his father in a position of affluence in his old age.

Hence the news of his death had come to Jim with stunning force, and then old Tom Knowles' statement had momentarily driven him to the point of insanity. He had started back for the Paradise House with the design of revealing his identity and forcing the truth from somebody.

Before he had got halfway there, however, the habits of self-discipline and repression had resumed their sway over him. He pulled himself together. If he was to make anything of this situation, and, in particular, if he was to play his cards to the best advantage, it was essential that he should employ strategy rather than brute violence.

There were many factors in the situation which had to be cleared up. Had Clouston murdered his father at Flannery's bidding, and had Ray Clouston been double-crossed by Flannery after her father's death?

That was the way it looked. Even if Clouston's gun had sent the bullet through Luke Trevor's heart, Jim did not believe the daughter had been privy to the murder. But none the less a barrier had sprung up between them which had not existed even after the encounter of that day.

Jim registered at the Paradise House under the name Jim Strange, washed the stains and dust of travel off his clothes, and stabled his horse. There was an indifferent meal in the dining room, for Paradise House was everything before it was a hotel. However, it satisfied Jim's needs. Feeling more his normal self in a clean shirt, Jim sauntered out again.

Alto Verde by day and Alto Verde by night looked like different places. The main street, which had been practically deserted in the afternoon, was now crowded with people.

It was a Friday night, and, Friday being payday at the mines, miners had come in from Las Vegas with money to burn, besides the sprinkling of punchers and Mexicans from across the Border, twelve miles distant. Horses were hitched to all the racks in front of the buildings, and a few cars were parked against the raised wooden sidewalks that extended for a short distance on either side of the "business block."

From several saloons and dance halls along the street came the sound of radios and mechanical pianos, mingled with the shouts of the revelers.

But none of these places came within measurable distance of Paradise House in popular appeal. The entrance had blossomed out with strings of colored lights that spelled the name. From within the dance hall came the tinny blare of a mechanical piano, shouts of men intermingled with the squeals of women and the incessant click of the roulette wheel.

The hall was packed with a crowd, chiefly miners with a few cowhands. In their high boots, chaps, or heavy drill

trousers, and huge sombreros, they were clumping heavily about the floor, some swinging the painted dance hall girls in their arms, others dancing with one another.

A busy throng was gathered about the roulette and faro tables in a recess. Many of the visitors were already drunk, and business was in full swing.

Jim made his way leisurely toward the bar, elbowing his way through the crowd until he stood immediately in front of Tom Baines. Baines caught his eye, but appeared not to recognize him and continued pushing glasses and bottles across the bar without intermission. Only Lew Tunnery, farther down the room, gave Jim a furtive look as he wiped the wet mahogany.

Jim's reflection in the mirror was certainly not much like that which he had shown two or three hours earlier, but the removal of the stains of travel did not seem sufficient reason to account for Baines' failure to know him again.

A burly man in mining clothes came pushing through the crowd, which gave way before him quickly. Two guns were in his belt, his hat was jammed down tight on the back of his head, his face was flushed, sneering, brutal. An ugly customer, as the crowd evidently knew.

"Gimme a glass of yore rotgut, Tom!" he roared. "Who's drinkin'?" He swung round on the crowd. "Step up and name yore pizen, fellers."

He had elbowed his way unceremoniously in front of Jim, and had planted himself sideways against the bar, thumbs hooked in his belt, and arms extended.

"You bought standin' room for three?" asked Jim, as he quietly removed the other's elbow from his belt.

The bully turned and surveyed him with an insolent leer. "Feller, I bought all the room I want the day I was born," he answered. "Got anything to say about it?"

"Not much," Jim answered. "I was jest thinkin'—it called to mind another feller I used to know. Always had to have plenty space to spread hisself. He got his throat cut in the end, though."

"Yeah? Yuh don't say! Throat cut?" mimicked the other. "Meanin' yo're aimin' to cut my throat maybe? Got a touch of the Mex in yuh, have yuh? Or a splash of color? Yaller or black, maybe?"

"Not at all," answered Jim in a slow drawl. "You mistook my meanin', mister. Feller I was referrin' to wasn't a man at all. He was one of my dad's prize hawgs."

A loud snicker from someone in the crowd was followed by deadly silence. Then came a scurry to sidestep. Jim saw Tom Baines, behind the bar, moving like a rather clumsy pupil in a dancing school. As for the bully, for an instant he looked thunderstruck, glaring at Jim with staring eyes and opening mouth.

Then, quick as a flash, his hand leaped to his holster. But it never got there.

Before the fingers could close on the protruding gun butt, the bully's head snapped back under the force of Jim's right fist. The fingers quivered in the air, the eyes closed, the great body sagged, and the man slumped to the floor, where he lay for a moment, motionless.

Then he sat up, blinking stupidly, to see Jim standing over him, and a milling, shouting crowd about him, patting Jim on the shoulder and offering him drinks. It was plain that the bully's overthrow pleased about everybody in the saloon.

A big man of middle age, with black mustaches drooping over his yellow teeth, and a star on his lapel, came pushing through.

"What's the trouble here?" he demanded.

"This here gent and Big Jackson had a few words, Sheriff," answered a man in the crowd. "Gent spoke last, thus fur."

Sheriff White gave Jim a comprehensive glance.

"Stranger, huh? We don't allow no gun pullin' in this town," he said.

"He didn't pull no gun, Sheriff," volunteered another of the spectators. "He connected with his fist."

"I don't care how you connected, stranger, we don't aim to have no outsiders makin' trouble here. You go mighty slow while yo're in Alto Verde, or thar'll be trouble. Mr. Flannery seen you yet?" he added in a lower tone.

"Ain't paid my respecks so far," said Jim.

"Well, you'll find it convenient to go see Mr. Flannery if yo're aimin' at makin' a stay in this here town," responded White.

Jim had already put two and two together. The opportune appearance of the sheriff, coupled with Big Jackson's unprovoked aggression, had convinced him that he had been singled out under orders, that he was being tried out by Flannery. The expression on White's face seemed to confirm him in this belief.

Big Jackson, meanwhile, had staggered to his feet, scowling and muttering. Whether or no the sheriff's presence had added to his chastened frame of mind, he was clearly in no mood to renew the combat. With a wicked look at Jim, he slouched out of the saloon.

THE whole affair had been a matter of only a minute or two. The crowd had already scattered. Jim saw Tom Baines make a gesture toward him, and went up to the bar again.

"Didn't reckernize you at first, feller," lied Baines glibly. "You shore did hand Big Jackson one. You best go right in and see Mr. Flannery, like the sheriff told you. Yeah, that was one sweet wallop, I'll tell the world."

"Where'll I find Flannery?" asked Jim.

Tom Baines jerked his thumb toward the back of the bar. "In thar. Not that way"—as Jim looked at the door beside the mirror. "Go round the back of the building. Say, I been tryin' to figure out whar I seen you before. Wasn't you at Xavier the night that crowd pulled off that job at the shippin' corrals?"

Jim grinned expressively, and Tom Baines chuckled. "Say, you're one of them wise guys, ain't you!" he said in tones of admiration. "Well, don't keep the old man waitin'. See you again!"

Turning away, Jim caught sight of Lew Tunnery eyeing him again in that furtive way. He felt uneasy. Both Tom Baines and Lew Tunnery seemed on the verge of recognizing him, and it was essential that he should not be recognized.

Well, there was nothing he could do about that! Jim found the small door in the rear of the building, with an opaque window in it, illuminated by the light inside. A growling summons answered his knock, and he opened the door and stepped inside.

The room in which he found himself was a comparatively small one. Between the door and window was a large roll-top desk; around the walls were a half dozen cheap chairs. There was no other furniture within. Flannery was seated at the desk in a swivel chair, a long cigar stuck out of the corner of his mouth.

He was big, obese, bull-headed, with blue-black upper lip and jowl, and a shock of black hair graying at the temples. A typical ward boss, but something more. There was something more to the man than his great physical strength. There was a certain shrewd intelligence in his face, evidence of brains enough to have given him his dominating position in Alto Verde.

And the realization that he was face to face with the man who was responsible for his father's death, even if his hand had not fired the gun, stiffened Jim into a desperate effort at self-control. He wanted to step forward and batter with his fists at that bull-head.

For a second the fight with himself was a severe one. For that moment everything was blotted out. Then Flannery's face reappeared out of a

fog, and Jim noticed, incongruously enough, that one of the heavy-lidded eyes was gray, the other brown. Flannery was tilting back in the swivel chair, surveying Jim with a scowl. By some process of telepathy, Jim knew that this man was already acquainted with the result of Big Jackson's trial of strength in the saloon.

"Well, now, what's yore name and whaddya want?" Flannery growled.

"Answerin' to the name Jim Strange at present, and they told me you wanted me to pay my respects," said Jim.

"Who told you that?" asked Flannery, eyeing Jim craftily.

"Sheriff White and Mr. Baines. I'm aimin' at makin' a stay in town. Sheriff said strangers would find it convenient to see you."

"He never spoke a truer word. Yeah, strangers find it damn useful to stand in with me. Where you from?"

"Xavier. That's whar I got word about there bein' jobs in Alto Verde."

"And what's yore line?"

"Anything on the hoof."

Flannery threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Wisecracker, ain't you!" he said. "That's what Tom Baines told me. He thought you'd do." He let one great fist fall on the desk. "I've got jobs for good hombres who do what they're told," he said. "But you and me had best understand each other. I kin use a feller with brains and guts, and looks like you got both. But I don't want no independent smart-alecks workin' for me. Does that go?"

"It sure goes," said Jim.

Flannnery let his voice drop to a whisper. "Thar's somethin' doin' to-night," he said. "You ride off alone and casual-like, and meet up with the boys at midnight *pronto,* in the pass, at the far end of that line of oil derricks. You git me?"

Flannery's eyes narrowed to mere slits; they burned into Jim's face.

"I sure do, Mr. Flannery," answered Jim.

"Wear a handkerchief over part of yore face, and, when you meet the boys they'll reckernize you. And ask for Al—he's runnin' the show to-night. When you git back I'll talk turkey with you."

CHAPTER IV

Jim Rides Out

THE racket in the dance hall was at its height. Jim, in his shabby room, was trying to come to a decision as to what course to pursue. Such a decision must be arrived at quickly, for his watch showed that it was past ten o'clock.

There was only one possible deduction to be drawn from Flannery's instructions, and that was that a rustling party was being planned; and, again, that Ray Clouston's steers were its objective was perfectly plain.

Jim was in no mind to expose his hand to Flannery. He believed that Flannery was the man with whom he would have to settle his heavy score, while he was human enough to feel no particular enthusiasm for Ray Clouston's cattle.

On the other hand, he was not going to take part in any such scheme as Flannery intended.

As he was thinking it over, he stood in the window, and he saw a figure approaching from the direction of the main street. As it drew near, he recognized Lem Cleaver, the banker.

It was impossible to mistake that lean, hunched figure, with the peculiar shuffling tread. Lem Cleaver had been a familiar sight in Alto Verde for years, and was known to all, though Jim had never come face to face with him in his life.

The banker was making his way toward Flannery's quarters, and from the discreet manner in which he slipped through the shadows it was evident that he did not wish his going there to become a matter of public knowledge.

Immediately underneath the window of Jim's room was a sloping roof, sup-

ported by four wooden posts, and forming a cover for the small porch below. As Cleaver disappeared beneath it, Jim slipped through the window and crawled to the edge. At the same time he heard a peculiar rap upon the door of Flannery's room, followed by its quiet opening and prompt closing.

Climbing a few feet down the post, Jim discovered that the opaque window of Flannery's room was slightly down at the top. Looking in, he could catch a glimpse of the banker seated in one of the hard chairs beside the desk, and of Flannery, leaning toward him from the swivel chair.

"Well, what brings you here, Lem?" asked Flannery, pushing a box of cigars toward his visitor, which, however, Lem Cleaver declined.

"Been thinking over the matter of the Clouston ranch," he answered, "and I've about decided to sell up Miss Ray. No use spinning out the agony any longer—after to-night."

The sounds from the dance hall, shut off by the roof and projecting corner of the building, were low enough to enable Jim to hear every word distinctly, and there was no doubt, apart from the banker's rasping laugh, that he was referring to the coming raid.

"Yeah, but how about findin' another sucker to buy in the ranch?" came Flannery's answer. "Thar's a month before the stockholders' meetin', and we could use his money, too."

"Where will I find one?" asked Cleaver.

"Hell, that's yore business, ain't it? Of course, I don't suppose heaven will send one along jest when we want him, but it would mean ten grand to split."

"Too risky advertisin' in the Xavier papers," answered Cleaver. "Nor there ain't time enough. We don't want to bring in some outsider who'd show fight, and maybe apply for an injunction, anyhow. If one happened along, I'd call it an act of Providence. But, otherwise, I'm inclined to sell out that girl and let the ranch lie, unless you like an idea I've been milling over."

"Well, spit it out, Lem," came Flannery's snarling tones.

"Well, it's this way. Ray Clouston's got a biggish bunch of that oil stock, as you know. And she's as stubborn as hell, and means to hang on to the ranch as long as she can. She said something about putting up that stock as security for renewing the mortgage for three months, believing she can get her steers to market."

Both men went into outbursts of laughter.

"She'll sing different after to-night," said Flannery.

"She certainly will. Besides, I made her put that offer in black and white. I can hold her to it by accepting. The point is, I'd feel more comfortable with that bunch of stock in our hands."

"Why?" asked Flannery. "We control the votes, don't we?"

"The company doesn't hold more than thirty per cent of the stock. Trouble is, some of the little holders have been getting wise to the fact that it's jumped, and they're holding on. That damn leak from headquarters is going to cost us thousands before we're through.

"I warned our crowd in Xavier against losing majority control, but they were positive they could buy in all the stock they wanted after it had dropped to zero, and every dollar looked big to them."

"Can't blame them for that," grunted Flannery. "It looks big to me, too. However, it's up to you, Lem, to choose between gittin' the ranch now, or gittin' the stock and lettin' Ray Clouston have enough rope to strangle her around the time of the stockholders' meetin'. Ten grand would sure make a good split.

"But don't roughhouse that girl. She looks better to me than five grand. By the way, Lem, some of them minin' fellers from Las Vegas hold quite a bunch of stock."

"I know, and they're wise to its rise, too."

"That feller, Nat Fergus, the engi-

neer, is in the house to-night. I tried to git him into a poker game, and I set one of the girls onto him, but he's a wise guy. And, by the way, I got a new feller to-day, sent in by the Xavier crowd. I'm sendin' him out with the bunch, and I guess he'll make good. What the—!"

The figure that was rapping softly at the door had slipped so quickly through the dark that Jim had failed to see it until he heard the knock. Gripping the post with his knees, and peering down, he was able to make out Lew Tunnery.

"Mr. Baines wanted to know if he could see you a minute," said Tunnery, in a soft whisper.

"Yeah, tell him I'll be with him in a few minutes," answered Flannery. "And see here, Lew, how often am I to tell you not to slink and pussyfoot around that way? My nerves ain't what they useter be. Gittin' kinder temperamental, I reckon."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Flannery," said Lew. "I thought you heard me."

"Well, you watch yore step, Lew," snarled Flannery. "And git out of here!"

Again the flitting figure seemed to depart without a sound. Then Jim heard Flannery's hoarse whisper.

"That feller makes me sick, Lem. Ever thought, supposin' Luke Trevor's kid was to come back, growed up?"

"He won't come back," answered the banker. "He'd best not, for his own good, anyway, or he'll find himself up against something he don't suspect."

Once more came the malevolent chuckle, and Lem Cleaver slipped away into the darkness. As Flannery came out, Jim climbed quickly back through the window of his room.

HE was in the saddle five minutes later, and was working his way through the crowded street. The conversation that he had overheard had shown him the one vulnerable point of the Cleaver-Flannery combination. If it was possible to obtain a majority of votes at the meeting of the stockholders, the whole crooked scheme could be blocked.

Working secretly, where no opposition was expected, might not Jim be able to obtain proxies here and there from among the small stockholders, and in this way confront the meeting with an accomplished fact? Wild as the project sounded, it seemed to Jim to contain possibilities.

This meant that Ray Clouston must be persuaded to abandon her attempt to hold the ranch, rather than let Cleaver get possession of her block of stock. Therefore, the more steers the rustlers succeeded in getting away with that night, the better.

But in spite of this fact, Jim was now on his way to warn the girl of the attempt. Why he was thus running counter to the scheme he had evolved to checkmate Flannery, he had no very clear idea.

Jim shone essentially in action, and his "hunches" were, as a rule, a better guide than fine-spun policies.

Once free of the town, he turned into the trail that ran toward the pass. He would still be an hour ahead of Flannery's gang, and he did not anticipate meeting them.

Nor did he. He passed the last derrick before encountering any human being; but then of a sudden a gaunt figure loomed up out of the night, and ran screeching toward the straggling clumps of mesquite that were the outposts of the mesquite jungles, stretching back to the foothills.

Dan rode after it. The figure turned, mumbling curses at him, and Jim recognized Tom Knowles.

"Hello, Tom, it's Jim!" he called. "Don't you know me?"

But Tom Knowles, seizing the advantage he gave him by reining in, bolted like a rabbit into the brush and was lost to view in a moment. Then Jim remembered the old fellow's wild speech that afternoon.

"Plumb crazed, I guess," he said, as he turned his horse toward the range.

"Flannery's sure got a lot of fellows like Tom Knowles whose savin's he took. Wouldn't be surprised if one of them was to get him some day."

He was on the range now, and striking through the moonless night toward his home, the instinct of the man rather than his hands controlling the directions of the horse. On, till of a sudden the dark forms of cattle loomed up suddenly, close at hand. Bawling began; the thudding of hoofs started as the herd milled. Jim drew rein hastily; in the darkness he had ridden straight into the midst of a night-feeding herd.

But that was no explanation for the imminent stampede that his appearance had occasioned. These beasts were shorthorns, Herefords, not given to night frights like the old-fashioned Texas steer. Jim's range lore told him that at some recent time these cattle had been badly driven.

"Rustlers' work," he told himself.

And as he said that a bullet fanned his cheek, and the sharp crack of a revolver sounded.

He realized that he was a perfect target, sitting his horse alone, with the starry background behind him. He flung himself forward in the saddle, and a second bullet hooted over his head. A third thudded into the saddle, causing the paint to shy violently.

The herd had already begun to run, but had stopped some little distance away. The marksman was suddenly visible, leaning forward in the saddle, watching him.

Jim kicked the paint and started full tilt toward him, leaning forward till he was lying with his face almost level with the paint's mane. He smiled grimly as he heard the sharp click of the hammer on an empty cartridge, and saw his adversary's desperate effort to reload in time.

Then Jim had galloped alongside and caught the hand that held the weapon.

"Drop 'er!" he commanded tersely, and wrenched the weapon away. His own gun leaped from the holster. Then an exclamation broke from his lips.

It was Ray Clouston, facing him defiantly, her teeth set, her eyes flashing, and the muscles of her small wrist set tense beneath his grip.

"Kill me, you coward, if you dare!" she panted. "I knew what you were when you came to the house this afternoon. I knew you'd be back, and I've been waiting for you. I knew Flannery was bringing in more gunmen from Xavier."

"So you think I came here to rustle your steers?" Jim smiled grimly, but there was no mirth behind that smile. Had Ray's father killed Luke Trevor? The question hammered insistently upon his brain.

"Ever hear of a lone rustler tryin' to drive a herd?" Jim continued. "Suppose I'm carryin' a fishin' net to round 'em up with?"

"You don't need to try your wit on me! You—"

"You've got nothin' but your suspicions. And on the strength of them you shot at me, and shot to kill. You'd be a murderess but for a little luck. Mighty well attached to Luke Trevor's ranch, ain't you?"

There was measureless contempt in Jim's voice as he shot forth the gibe which he had been unable to resist. The girl's reply held a shade of uncertainty in the tone for the first time.

"You're on my range," she cried. "I've given warning that I'd shoot. And I warn you that I've got a dozen men with me. They may be here at any moment. If you're not a rustler, what are you doing here?"

"I'll tell you, Miss Ray, and I'll tell you quick. Flannery's gang's comin' to drive your steers, and they'll be here inside of an hour, at most. He thinks I'm in with him, but I'm playin' a game of my own. Now, if you want to keep your Herefords, you'll do just what I tell you.

"You and me and those men of yours will drive 'em behind that hogback a mile or so away to the west. We'll line up there, and then when the gang

comes we'll give them something more than they're expectin'."

"But—but how am I to know that this story of yours is true?" panted the girl, her voice revealing her distress and uncertainty. "You came riding out of the night—I don't know who you are, your name, or anything about you."

"Jim Strange, Miss Ray. That's what I'm callin' myself."

"It's not your name, then?"

"It's my name at present. But there's no time to stay here talkin'. Are you goin' to help get them steers back of the hogback?"

She hesitated, then suddenly yielded. "Yes, I'll do it," she answered. "That doesn't mean I trust you. But there's nobody else I can trust either. And I must have my gun."

Dan handed her the revolver. "Load her, Miss Ray, and if you think I'm leadin' your cattle into a trap, don't hesitate to shoot. I'm tryin' to help, that's all. How about those dozen men you've got, who may be here at any moment?"

At that the girl momentarily broke down; her voice shook as she answered.

"I was lying to you—lying to frighten you. My last men left three days ago, because Lem Cleaver had impounded all the balance I had in the bank, against his claims upon this ranch. I haven't anybody to help me!"

CHAPTER V

The Rustlers

"LET'S get busy. Don't hustle them. Plenty of time if we drive them slow." Jim worked his way slowly around the flank of the small herd after these instructions to Ray.

So she had been carrying on alone! And had ridden out alone to nightherd her steers! One didn't often find a girl with courage like that! And he searched back through the mists of memory, trying to recall Ray as she had been, and remembered her only as a spoiled child, scampering bareback about the range on her father's broncos, and grinning with delight when one succeeded in sunfishing her off.

There did not seem to be more than about two hundred Herefords in this herd; still, it was slow work getting the beasts headed toward the hogback. Once this had been done, however, they began a steady movement in its direction. Jim quickly saw that Ray knew her business. She made no attempt to quicken the animals' pace, merely moving slowly from rear to flank, and keeping the beasts together.

Presently Jim saw the ridge of the hogback under the stars. He rode up to the girl.

"Well, we've got them here," he said. "Now we'll drive them about a quarter mile farther back, where that stream runs into the Penasco. Grass is always green there, and they won't be so apt to run if they hear shootin'. And you better go back to the house. Guess I can handle that crew alone. From what I've seen of them, they ain't likely to stay after they find there's a welcome waitin' for them."

"How do you know about that stream, and how did you know about the hogback?" asked Ray, with new suspicion in her voice. "I thought you were a stranger?"

Jim, taken aback, was completely at a loss how to reply without revealing his identity.

"I guess you know a good bit about my range, whatever your purpose was in coming here to warn me," she said, with a bitter intonation in her voice. "Well, I'm going to stay. That doesn't mean I suspect you of being in with those men. I don't. But they're my steers, and I'm going to fight for them."

"You don't trust me?"

"No, I don't. I think you're playing some game of your own."

Well, that shot in the dark had found its mark, Jim thought ironically. He tried, however, to persuade the girl to keep out of danger.

"If you don't want to leave the job all to me, ride down to the dry gully at the far end of this hogback, Miss

Ray," he suggested. "You'll be out of the way of flyin' bullets there, an—"

"So you know about the dry gully, too, Jim Strange!" she retorted.

Jim turned his horse away angrily, and began moving the steers farther back. Ray took up her position on the opposite flank. They had driven the beasts about a quarter of a mile when Jim heard a faint medley of sounds coming out of the distance.

Immediately he wheeled and rode back full tilt, dismounting just below the hogback, and knee-haltering his horse. But Ray was already at his side, and there was nothing to do but halter her horse too.

"Keep down," he urged. "Don't show your head above the line. Here they come!"

The gang was evidently acquainted with the feeding ground of the steers, for they were riding at a gallop, and taking no trouble to conceal their presence. Shouts and cat-calls rang out, and one man, with a piece of tin to be used for starting the stampede, was already banging it lustily.

Then Ray's revolver cracked, and the yelling line slithered to a standstill within fifty yards, the horses sprawling in all directions as their riders reined them back upon their haunches.

"Keep off my range, all of you, or I'll fire!" Ray's voice was steely, cold, dispassionate.

"Hell, fellers, it's only the girl, and she's alone! She can't hit nothin'. Ride 'er down!" yelled a voice from the darkness.

The sprawling horses leaped convulsively as their riders rowelled them. Ray fired again, and then Jim, who had moved a little distance along the ridge, let them have it.

He emptied his revolver into the thick of the mass that was bearing down upon them. Three horses stumbled, flinging their riders, and their fall brought down three or four more animals in a tangled, struggling mass. Yelling and cursing, the rustlers upon the flanks of the advancing line pulled in, fired a volley, then turned and galloped back.

"Now give them hell!" yelled Jim, as if to his associates. And he loosed another volley, but aiming with intent over the heads of the yelling, struggling mob, into which he could have fired with deadly effect.

The sound of his voice completed their discomfiture. The rustlers, who had not foreseen any resistance, had had enough. They were picking themselves up and trying to extricate their horses, or galloping away, half in and half out of the saddle.

"Damn yuh, we'll git yuh fer this!" yelled one of the hindmost, pausing long enough to let loose a volley. "Yuh trapped us, but we'll git the hull crowd of yuh fer this!"

The yells died away in the distance. Jim leaped to his feet. "You all right, Miss Ray?" he called.

"I'm all right," came the girl's voice in answer—a little shaky, as if she was undergoing the natural reaction after the strain.

Jim got the horses and brought hers up to her. "We best see that the steers are all right," he said, as the sounds of bawling broke in on his ears. In another minute the two were mounted and riding back. The beasts were milling slowly, but showed no signs of beginning a stampede.

"Best leave them," said Jim. "They'll quiet down. And that crowd won't be back again to-night, not if I sized them up correctly."

"That's—all—right," answered Ray in a very small voice; and suddenly she began leaning toward him out of her saddle.

"Miss Ray, you—you're feelin' all right, ain't you?" asked Jim, putting out his arm to support her. His hand touched her shoulder, and his finger tips grew wet and sticky. And he was holding Ray unconscious in his arms.

JIM'S first thought was to lay the girl down on the grass and try to examine the wound; his second was

that the ranch house was only three-quarters of a mile away. And in any event he would have to convey her there.

Knowing her horse would follow, Jim lifted her from her saddle to his own and started. She lay perfectly limp in his arms, her cheek against his shoulder.

Jim forgot that this was the daughter of the man who had wronged his father, if not murdered him; he was only conscious that he was holding a woman in his arms, wounded and perhaps in danger of death. There was something infinitely pathetic in the small, helpless figure that had striven so valiantly to play a man's part, and yet was so essentially feminine.

The cottonwoods appeared, the ranch house loomed up. Jim picked up Ray in his arms and climbed out of the saddle. The house was dark, but the door was unfastened. He carried her inside. No need to grope through those well remembered rooms, unless the position of all the furniture had been changed.

And Jim felt that it had not been changed. As if endowed with some faculty of clairvoyance, he knew that everything was exactly where it had been when he went away eight years before.

There, in the corner behind the big fireplace, would be the lounge. He found it, and laid Ray down. Then he struck a match, discovered the oil lamp upon the table, and lit it. But for Ray's presence, he might simply have stepped back into his father's house.

His first glance at the wound reassured him. It was bleeding only a little. When he had drawn down the dress from the girl's smooth shoulder, he saw that it was the merest graze. It was not the wound, but the reaction after the fight, coupled with the strain of carrying on alone, that had caused Ray to faint.

Jim took the lamp and went into the kitchen. He dipped a towel in water, and, returning, washed away the blood from the little surface wound. Ray was already coming back to herself. Her eyes opened, and she looked at Jim as if she did not know where she was. He pulled up the dress hastily; the wound had ceased to bleed. Then he saw understanding come back into the girl's eyes.

"You brought me here. They—hit me. Is it bad?"

"Nothin' but the least bit of a graze, Miss Ray," Jim answered. "It was the shock more'n anything else, I guess. You just lie quiet a while, and you'll be all right in the mornin'."

"You saved my steers—Jim Strange."

"Didn't require much savin', Miss Ray. Them rustlers were the most reckless devils ever run from the sound of a pop-gun. They won't be back tonight, that's sure. And in the mornin' —well, you'll have to get help. You can't run this ranch alone."

"I'll never give up," answered Ray doggedly. "That man Flannery threatened me and insulted me. But I'll show them that John Clouston's daughter isn't the kind to knuckle under as he thinks. And I'll shoot him if he sets foot on my land again. He knows it. But I don't understand who you are, or why you helped me, Jim Strange."

"You don't think I'm workin' with Flannery now?"

"No, but there's—something queer. I—I don't understand. You frighten me a little. And there's something about your face makes me think I've seen you before."

Jim was afraid she was going to question him, but she went on:

"You know, my father died a few months ago, and he never wanted this ranch at all. Our home ranch is behind it, but it's only a small one, and he wanted more land for his cattle. Then the house was accidentally burned down, and we had to spend last summer in tents.

"Luke Trevor was our neighbor. Dad had got him into an unfortunate speculation, which hit Dad too, but it made

ill-feeling. Luke Trevor had to mortgage this ranch to Lem Cleaver, and after he died Dad paid out a lot of money on a six months' option and to renew the mortgage for that length of time. Twenty per cent, Lem Cleaver charged him.

"Dad was sure he could make a clean-up on the fall sales, and he felt he owed that much to his dead friend. You see, Luke Trevor had a son who ran away from home years ago. But his father hadn't treated him exactly right, and my dad wanted to save the property for the boy, if ever he came back, to make up for the bad investment he'd persuaded Luke Trevor to make.

"Then Dad died of pneumonia, and that gang of rustlers began raiding my stock. They've robbed me of nearly all I had. Some of my men were in league with them, I know. And Flannery too. He and Lem Cleaver are determined to get the ranch, because of the oil that's beneath it. And everybody knows the Penasco Valley Oil Company isn't as poor as it pretends to be."

Jim looked at her in troubled silence. The revelation of Clouston's motives in buying the ranch had put an entirely different complexion upon the matter of his father's death. Clouston could not have been the murderer. And Jim knew that Ray was speaking the truth.

"This Luke Trevor died suddenly?" he blurted out.

"Yes, he—died suddenly." Then, with a flash of anger, "They shot him, murdered him in cold blood, as he was riding home from town. Everybody knows it, though it was hushed up. And they spread wicked lies, lies that were at the back of my father's resolution not to let Lem Cleaver and his crowd get this ranch. At least, they strengthened his determination."

"Lies about the dead man?" Jim could hardly form the words.

"About—about— Oh, please don't ask me to talk about it! But I've got something that nobody knows about. A clue to the murderer. I picked it up on the very spot where Luke Trevor was killed. I had gone there to find just the sort of thing I did find, because Luke Trevor was the best friend I ever had."

She rose—Jim tried to protest, but she disregarded him. She went to a chair in a corner of the room, pulled out one of the rungs, and extracted something from the socket. She held it up for Jim to see.

It was a small sheath of gold, or plated, metal that had once formed the frame of a cuff button, and the whole sheath had evidently dropped off, leaving the shape of the piece of jewelry perfectly distinct.

"Some day," said Ray, "I shall see the mate to that. That's one of the reasons why I'm hanging on!"

The girl replaced the sheath, and Jim forced himself to think. If Ray remained in her present frame of mind, it meant that she would have to turn in her oil stock to Cleaver. If that happened, his scheme of obtaining a majority of proxies at the meeting would be seriously jeopardized. And he knew that to attempt to explain the matter to her would be futile. She was too deeply set in her determination.

However, he began, "Miss Ray, seems to me you're plumb foolish thinkin' of stayin' on here. First place, you can't watch your stock alone, and you say you can't afford to hire anybody. And you couldn't trust them if you did. They'd sure be workin' for Flannery. And, in the second place, it's better to get out with a little than with nothin'. No, Miss Ray, you'll have to give up."

"I'll never do it!" the girl flashed back at him. "I'll drive those steers to Xavier single-handed rather than surrender. Maybe some of the other ranchers will help me. Eph Logan or Wallie Knight. They know it will be their turn next. I've told them that. I'll save what steers I've got, and I'll best Flannery."

Jim realized that there was no more to be said. But he'd save her—in her own despite, he'd save her.

"Well, I'm sure glad I've been able to help you, Miss Ray," he said. "But something's got to be done to save your steers if them cowmen don't see their way clear to comin' to the rescue."

"I think they will," answered the girl. "Things can't go on this way, and there's none of them but owed a good deal to my father, and Luke Trevor. Don't worry about me, and thank you, from the bottom of my heart."

She held her hands out, and Jim took them. A mighty weight had rolled away from his heart with the realization that Clouston had been guiltless of his father's murder, had tried to save the ranch for himself, though he was thousands of miles away.

Suddenly, flooding back, there came the memories of Ray as a child, and, with them, memories of the days that had passed, when there was no Flannery in Alto Verde, no terrorism, no hired thugs.

Those memories steeled Jim's heart. But he only held Ray's hands for a moment, and then turned away. The expression on her face was a troubled one, and Jim could not run the risk of her discovering his identity just yet.

CHAPTER VI

A Crooked Deal

THE moon had risen, lighting up the range, and Jim started back for the ridge, with the purpose of examining the scene of the fight.

What course of action he would pursue in case he came upon any of Flannery's men, wounded, he did not know. To take him in to Sheriff White would be to force the issue, and he was hardly inclined to do that yet. On the other hand, that would simplify things considerably for Ray.

He was spared having to make the decision, for the attackers had all made their getaway, together with their horses, though the grass was liberally spattered with blood in the place where the raiders had gone down in a tangle. Whether it was human or equine blood, it was impossible to say.

Jim thought for a minute or two, then turned his horse toward the pass and rode through into Alto Verde, without meeting a soul until he reached the main street.

By this time it must have been between two and three in the morning. The crowds in the streets were gone, but the uproar from the honkytonks was, if anything, louder. Here a man lay, dead drunk, on the sidewalk, there two punchers, well under the influence of Baines' liquor, were trying to mount their horses without unhitching them, and cursing the beasts for their strange behavior.

The mechanical piano inside the Paradise House was hammering out a jazz tune, and the dance hall, less crowded, was a scene of wilder abandonment.

A dozen miners, clasping their partners in a close embrace, were whirling round the room, shouting and hiccoughing, while the Mexican girls, with tired eyes, nevertheless played up to their mood for all they were worth.

Lew Tunnery was scurrying from the bar with a tray of glasses and a pail of cracked ice in which half a dozen champagne bottles rested; while in a corner an animated poker game was proceeding, with a circle of spectators looking on.

There were four men at the table, and two of them were crooks at a glance—a surly, loutish fellow with furtive eyes, and the man Scotty, to whom Tom Baines had introduced Jim on his first appearance inside the Paradise House. Scotty, a smallish man with a pockmarked face, and the death-white color and slim hands of the gambler, looked up at Jim and recognized him.

"Hello, Jim Strange, wanta take a hand?" he called. "This feller's steppin' out."

The man in question rose and dropped his cards on the table. He was evidently a miner, and the calm way in

which he gathered up his chips showed that he had not been a loser. From which Jim guessed that the fourth man was the pigeon to be plucked, and a glance at him confirmed this impression.

He was a big man, with red hair, apparently of a better standing than nearly all the frequenters of the place, and just now he was obviously badly hipped by the stuff he had been drinking. His eyes were half closed, and he looked down dubiously at the cards that had just been dealt him, while his body swayed slightly in the chair.

Jim had had no intention of taking a hand, but at the sight of the big man he felt a sudden wrath, a determination to take a hand to some good purpose. One of those quick instincts to which we are all subject upon occasion had told him that this man and he were destined to be friends, belonged to the same spiritual tribe.

"So yuh got back?" asked Scotty, as Jim approached. "Hey, Mr. Fergus, wanter introjuce a friend of mine, name Jim Strange."

Jim remembered the name as that mentioned by Lem Cleaver in his talk with Flannery. Nat Fergus looked up with a surly grunt; then, apparently recognizing in Jim precisely what Jim had seen in him, stretched out his hand.

"Pleased meetyuh," he said. "Hope you're bringin' good luck. Never had a run like this before all m'life."

"I hope for yore sake it's goin' to change," grinned Scotty. "Can't keep on like this forever." He patted the stack of chips in front of him complacently.

"Gimme two thousand more," roared Fergus, seeming to pull himself together. "I'm going to trim you before the night's over. Sit down, Strange. It's aces wild and the sky the limit."

Jim took his seat. As he did so, he noticed Tom Baines watching him from the doorway between the dance hall and the saloon. Though none of Flannery's gang were in evidence except Scotty, who had evidently not been a member of the raiding party, Baines looked as if he knew what had happened that night.

"I'm openin' for ten," said Scotty, dropping a red chip in the kitty.

For some minutes the game ran smoothly. Then Fergus began to relax into his former torpor, swaying slightly, his eyes half closing.

Suddenly he seemed to grow alert, though there was no change in his facial expression. Jim knew why. In the hand that had been dealt him there were four kings.

"One card," he said, to Scotty's inquiry.

Fergus took one card. The loutish crook stood pat. Scotty drew three—from the bottom of the pack. Yet he drew with such lightning swiftness that Jim was only sure because his eyes had been riveted on those slender fingers.

"Bet a hundred," said Fergus.

"Raise you a hundred"—from the confederate.

"And a hundred more. This looks like a real hand to me," grinned Scotty, putting his stake in the kitty. "Guess that'll hold you, Mr. Fergus," he taunted the big man.

"Think so, do you? Well, here's where I trim you," shouted Fergus. "Raise you a thousand!"

"Too steep for me," said Jim; and the confederate passed, too. Scotty appeared to hesitate, rubbing his chin with his finger.

"And a thousand," he said, as if reluctantly.

"And five," yelled Fergus. "Raise that if you dare! Here! Gimme a pencil and a piece of paper!"

"Your word's good enough, Mr. Fergus," answered the gambler. "I'll see five thousand."

Fergus put down four kings and a jack of hearts.

Scotty laid his cards down one after the other. He had a straight flush—eight, seven, six, five, and four of spades. "Guess that fixes you, Mr. Fergus," he observed quietly.

Fergus straightened himself slowly.

"You've busted me," he said quietly. He was quite sober on the instant. "I'll write an I.O.U. and let you have the money inside of three days."

"You don't need to, Mr. Fergus," answered Jim. "This feller was cheatin'. He drew that straight flush from the bottom of the pack."

Scotty's whole body quivered under the tension of his emotion. For an instant he glared at Jim, absolutely nonplussed by this treachery on the part of one whom he had supposed to be a confederate.

'Yeah, I saw that, too," came a voice from one of the crowd about the table. "Been watchin' him for some time. He—"

The words were cut short by two revolver cracks, almost but not quite, at the same time. The bullet from Scotty's revolver embedded itself in the floor within the circle of the spectators. The revolver itself spun dizzily in the air and dropped upon the table, and Scotty howled as he held up a shattered finger.

IN an instant the room was a pandemonium. The man at the mechanical piano stopped pedaling, letting the music die away in a wheezy moan. The girls shrieked and broke from the clutch of their partners, who began milling like the steers on Ray's range.

Nat Fergus was on his feet, glaring at the wounded gambler, who was shrieking curses at Jim. In the absence of his crowd, and finding sentiment against him, the gambler began backing toward the saloon, raving and shaking his injured hand, from which the blood was dripping.

Jim seized Nat by the arm. "Best get out of here, Fergus," he said. "They were layin' to trim you."

He forced a way through the crowd, which at first tried to follow, and then, deciding that the chief center of interest was the gambler, went milling back, leaving the two men together.

"Your horse outside?" asked Jim.

"That's him." Fergus indicated a big, heavy brown, hitched to the rail. "But say, how come—?"

"Listen, and keep it under your hat! Flannery set that man onto you, likewise one of the girls—"

"Dolores. Pretty little thing. I'd sure have fallen for her if she hadn't tried to rush me. Wanted a thousand berries for to give up the life and make a clean start somewheres—the old gag—"

"Yeah, and what Flannery wants is that oil stock of yours. Don't pay a cent on any gaming claims. I guess they've soaked you pretty well."

"More'n I can afford." The big man looked rueful. "But only a few hundreds till to-night. Must have put some drops in my drinks. I was sorter dazed. If you hadn't come— Nope, they don't get that stock. It's goin' up like yeast cakes. Somethin' doin' among that crooked Xavier crowd. But what's the idea?"

"Might get together, some of us stockholders, and put that gang out of office at the stockholders' meetin'. Just an idea. I'll see you again, maybe at Las Vegas."

"Glad to see you there. Ask for Nat Fergus, the chief minin' engineer. Everybody there knows me. I sure owe you a mighty lot, Strange. But where you goin' now?"

"Stayin' here," grinned Jim. "Don't mind me, Fergus. Good night."

He watched Fergus ride away, then went back. The piano had started again, the fun was in full swing once more, and another poker game, with different players, had begun.

The shooting affray had been only a trivial incident in the events of the evening. Few people noticed Jim when he went back into the dance hall. He made his way through the saloon, where a few men were lined up. They turned to look at him with perfunctory interest. Tom Baines beckoned.

"Flannery's back," he said. "Wants to see you bad. And Scotty's been with him. Doc's looking after his finger now. Say, what made you pull that

stunt? You'll have to git straight with Flannery or—" He stopped and jerked his thumb expressively toward the door, and Jim went around.

His revolver was handy to his hand, but he had no expectation of having to use it. He knew the crook nature, which is the same everywhere; whatever Flannery thought, he would wait till Jim had better disclosed his hand. The sweeter he was, the more the danger—but that danger was not an immediate one.

He knocked, and entered immediately, without waiting for the summons. One man was with Flannery—Al, the leader of the crew; his forearm was bandaged under his sleeve, and he was white about the gills.

"Say, Strange, how about that shootin' scrap with Scotty?" Flannery began, in a voice smooth as honey. "Called him a crook and salivated him in the hand, he said. Course, you know—"

"Didn't sign up to stand for no crooks, Flannery," returned Jim. "He was drawin' cards from the bottom of the pack and robbin' a friend of mine, Nat Fergus."

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed Flannery in feigned surprise. "Well, I don't stand for no crooked business in my house. I'm goin' to look into that. You sure done right. And Nat Fergus yore friend, you say? You got many friends around here, Strange?"

"Why, I'm the sort of feller who's got friends where you'd least expect to find 'em, Flannery," Jim parried.

"You're in luck then. And how about to-night? Al was waitin' nearly half an hour for you, and you didn't show up. We'd got a tip that that rustlin' gang was goin' to raid some of Miss Clouston's herd, and we sure needed a feller with yore punch and shootin' instincts."

"Why, I guess I must have misunderstood, Flannery," Jim answered. "I rode out through the pass, but I didn't meet up with your crowd in the place you said. Maybe I was too late for 'em. Did they git on the trail of them rustlers so far?" he added innocently.

Out of the tail of his eye he saw Al shift the bandage so that it should be invisible beneath his sleeve. But the game was wearing thin. Flannery was nonplussed for the moment.

"Naw, didn't see a thing," he growled. "Well, I guess that's about all, Strange. I should have remembered you was a stranger in Alto Verde when I sent you to the meetin' place. And about Scotty—I'm goin' to see nobody tries to cheat any guests of Paradise House. Good night to you."

Jim grinned, and walked quietly to the door. His hand was ready to his gun, but, as he had expected, nothing happened. Nor was anyone lurking in the alley at the back of the hotel. Jim made his way up to his room, locked the door, and placed a chair in inclined position beneath the handle. He locked the window, and then, placing his mattress on the floor beneath the bed, and his revolver at his hand, he lay down to sleep the sleep of the just.

"I've sure got Flannery guessing," he grinned as he closed his eyes. "I'll keep him on the jump so's he won't know where he's at. And that meetin' with Nat Fergus looks as if Fate's playin' into my hand. But I sure hate to do what I've got to do to Miss Ray tomorrow, though it's for her good. To think that little kid I used to see ridin' the ranges is grown up to be a woman like her!"

And his last thoughts as he sank into slumber were of Ray lying unconscious on the sofa, and his caring for her wound. Some day, perhaps—

CHAPTER VII

The Bait

IT was not until Jim was ready to leave his room that he remembered he had been dreaming, not of Ray Clouston, but of the sinister figure of Lew Tunnery. Nothing had happened during the night, and he had expected nothing to happen.

As soon as he was dressed Jim wrote

a letter to a firm of stock brokers in New York, instructing them to buy in for him all the Penasco Valley oil stock that they were able to obtain up to a certain sum—this sum being the total of his capital, with the exception of some fifteen thousand dollars.

He strolled over to the bank after breakfast. Lem Cleaver was in his office, and, thinking Jim a puncher, the banker looked up and nodded curtly to him as he turned over some papers on his desk.

"Well?" he asked. "What can I do for you, young man?"

"Why, I'm sort of lookin' around for a property to buy," answered Jim.

Lem Cleaver looked at him with more interest. "Mean you're taking up land?" he asked.

"Nope. Lookin' for a ranch."

Lem Cleaver's thin, shriveled face began to radiate amiability. "What sort of ranch? Sit down and tell me all about it."

"Why"—Jim tried to give an impression of simplicity—"fact is, I came into a bit of money lately. Jest a few thousands, but I'd been workin' on a ranch for a coupla years, and it looked like a chance to start out for myself. But I ain't buildin' up from the foundations. That's too long a job for my taste.

"Lookin' for a small ranch, complete, with some sort of house on it, and two or three hundred cattle with some breedin' stock, and a registered brand."

"Do you know what such a ranch would cost you, young man?" asked Lem, hardly able to believe that Providence had answered his appeal so quickly. "In the neighborhood of twenty-five thousand dollars. And that would be a small one."

"Yeah, but how about a mortgage?"

Lem Cleaver was thinking mighty hard as he looked Jim over. He was torn between two impulses. Prudence warned him to make sure of that bunch of stock that Ray Clouston owned; on the other hand, if Jim had ten thousand to stake, it would be pure velvet to split that amount with Flannery.

Lem Cleaver counted a bird in the hand as being worth a good many in the bush. Five thousand cash, and, of course, there was no danger of any attempt to oust the company at the stockholders' meeting. Nobody dreamed that they owned less than a controlling interest. And the stockholders were mostly more or less ignorant people, scattered far and wide through the countryside.

"How much cash have you got to put up, young man?" asked Lem Cleaver.

"Ten thousand," answered Jim. "Maybe twelve."

Lem bit. "It's curious your coming in just at this time," he said. "Fact is, I'm foreclosing on a young woman in the district in a month's time. Got to give her a month's notice, under the law. But I was thinking of telling her to-day.

"I hate to do it, of course, but she couldn't make the grade, and, as a matter of fact, her ranch was bought in on an executor's sale as a speculation, and so she's got no kick coming. What's your name, and how did you happen to want a ranch in the Penasco Valley?"

"Name's Strange," answered Jim; and, since Flannery had not mentioned his name to the banker, that meant nothing to him. "I heard land was cheap in this part of the country, and I want to git a start with a ready-made ranch of my own."

"Well, that's one way of starting," smiled Lem. He was convinced now that Jim was a young fool who had come into a small fortune. "Yes, you couldn't do better. It's rich, fertile soil, and, by the way, these are pedigree cattle, Herefords, and—"

"Ain't so much int'rested in the cattle," answered Jim, leaning forward confidentially. "Fact is, I heard there's oil here."

"Oil?" stammered Lem Cleaver, again at a loss.

"Yeah, all through the Penasco. The ranch is to be a standby, but it's the oil I'm thinkin' of. Knew a feller up in the Panhandle found oil on his nest-

er's place and sold out for half a million. This is confidential."

"Oh, sure," said Lem. "You certainly have got business sense, Mr. Strange. You probably know there was a company formed some time ago to drill for oil, but they struck the wrong place and had to suspend. Still, everyone knows there's oil. Between you and me, I believe it's right under this ranch I'm speaking about."

And Lem Cleaver's gullet held the hook, embedded firmly. Providence had certainly sent him the sucker he had been crying for. It would be a quick matter to clean out this Jim Strange and get the land back. Lem Cleaver's chief anxiety was to conclude the contract before Jim had a chance to reconsider.

Being a notary public and justice of the peace, within half an hour Lem Cleaver had transferred to Jim the deed to his father's ranch, and had taken a six months' mortgage, repeating that it would be a month before he would be legally able to take possession. Also a very nice roll of currency had changed hands, bills in denominations that made Lem stare and rub his hands.

"I'd like this transaction kept quiet for a few days," said Jim.

"Sure, that's all right," the banker answered. "I understand just how you feel, Mr. Strange. I'll notify the present holder to-day that I'm foreclosing right away."

Jim knew that he had done the only possible thing, if he was to carry out his plan to save Ray and oust the present régime from the valley. Yet it had involved deception, and he would have to ride out to Ray's house and explain the matter to her that afternoon. As he left the bank, a Mexican boy came up to him.

"You Señor Estrange?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm him. Who're you from?" asked Jim.

The boy, for answer, hurriedly thrust a slip of paper into his hand. Jim rode down a by-street, then unfolded it and read:

> Eph Logan heard the firing and rode over just after you left. There's going to be a meeting at his house to-night at seven. Please come if you possibly can. And thank you.
>
> Ray.

Jim stuck the little missive into his pouch. The sun was shining, his spirits had gone up.

Ray would understand.

He did not mean to spend the day at the Paradise House. He stopped at a little Mexican shop and bought some cakes, stuffed them into his bag, and started for the range. He meant to spend the day renewing his acquaintance with the country. He would ride slowly to the long crest behind the ranges, rest there through the heat of the day, and then go on to Eph Logan's.

It was not until that evening that Lem Cleaver saw Flannery. This being Saturday, the crowd in the honky-tonk was thicker than ever. Flannery, cigar in mouth, was standing between the saloon and the dance hall, watching the proceedings with satisfaction, when the banker was announced.

Flannery went round to the back and ushered him inside. "Well?" he asked, much as Cleaver had greeted Jim that morning.

"I got the sucker for that ranch all right," observed the banker.

"Yeah? How come? Local feller?"

"No, a stranger. Young fool who inherited some money and—would you believe it, Flannery?—he wants to buy a ranch in the valley, hoping to find oil under it."

"Haw, haw!" roared Flannery.

"Put up twelve grand, and here's your share," said Lem, depositing a bunch of bills on Flannery's desk. "I hooked him, and the papers are signed. Ray Clouston came in an hour later with that proposition about her stock, and I gave her a month's notice to quit. When she learned the facts that girl was hoppin' mad. Never saw nothing like it. Madder at Strange than at me, almost."

"What's that you say?" yelled Flannery. "Strange? Jim Strange?"

"That's his name. Know him?"

"Know him?" Flannery's voice sank to a husky whisper. "That feller rode into town yesterday, said he'd been sent on by the Xavier crowd, and knocked out Big Jackson in my saloon. Knocked him out cold.

"I told him to meet up with the gang last night. Yuh know what happened. When I got back he'd shot up Scotty for dealin' Nat Fergus from the bottom of the deck, with close on ten thousand in the kitty.

"What's he doin' here? Who's he spyin' for? Who's backin' him that he thinks he can pull stuff like that right in Paradise House? I tell yuh, Lem, he's got me plumb scared. I held off, waitin' for his next break, and you say —the hell you say!

"Lem, that's the feller shot up the crowd last night on the Clouston ranch. Rode off this mornin', but he's left his things, and he'll be back, and by God, I'm waitin' for him.

"But who is he? That's what I've got to know. His name ain't Strange, that's sure."

A curse broke from his lips as a soft footfall sounded in the room. Both men started and swung about, to see Lew Tunnery standing there, evil eyes gleaming out of a pallid face.

"Pussyfootin' again, damn you!" roared Flannery.

"I know who that feller is, Mr. Flannery," said Lew, in his soft whisper.

"You know him?"

"Yeah. Thought I reckernized him when he first come into the place, but wasn't sure. I'm sure now. I ought to know him if anybody does. That's Jim Trevor."

"Jim—Trevor! Luke Trevor's son?" said Flannery, in something between a snarl and a whine.

"Willin' to swear to it," answered Lew.

Flannery turned on his heel and looked at the banker. "We got him, then," he said.

"Don't lose a minute, Flannery," the banker urged. "Tell Sheriff White to raise a posse—"

"Naw, he'll be back. I know his breed. We'll be ready to welcome him when he comes. We got him cold," responded Flannery, with an evil grin.

CHAPTER VIII

"I Arrest Yuh for Murder"

THERE was the whole expanse of range country, spread out like a green jewel beneath; here were the mesquite lands, wild territory stretching for thirty miles to the Guadalupes, and beyond. A land of outlawed beasts and men, untamed, untamable. Jim was reviving a thousand memories of his boyhood as he rode slowly back toward Eph Logan's ranch house in the cool of the afternoon.

Yes, Ray would understand why he had bought her out. He would tell them all who he was, and what his plans were. All his difficulties seemed to be resolved. Flannery was only an incident in the serene life of the eternal hills and ranges.

It was growing dark when Jim turned into the trail that ran toward the ranch house. Logan herded some three hundred cattle in a pocket in the hills at the edge of the mesquite lands. Luke Trevor had befriended him some years before, when the man had gone to pieces after his wife's death, and was on the verge of losing his ranch. Logan had pulled himself together; dour, sullen, uncommunicative, he had lived alone, driving his fall bunch of steers to market, and eking out a precarious livelihood.

Wallie Knight and Zeb Handley, who had taken up land nearby, were still little more than nesters. Zeb was a widower, too, his two sons had left the ranch and gone to a distant city, and Knight's sister, Martha, came over every day to cook his meals and look after the house.

Knight, the youngest of the three, had a wife and large brood of children:

he was the most shiftless of all, but somehow managed to keep the roof above their heads, and to fill the children's stomachs. None of the three had so far been molested by Flannery, and they felt secure because of their insignificance. Also, it was certain that no oil lay underneath their lands.

That was why Ray, pleading with them, found them unresponsive and dubious. Eph Logan had just lit the lamp, and the three nesters, with Martha Knight, were sitting in the shabbily furnished parlor, listening to the girl's words.

"I tell yuh, Miss Ray, we gotta look at facts as they are," said Zeb. "What's happened is jest about the best thing could have happened. 'Tweren't yore dad's ranch, and he hadn't no business buttin' in that way arter Luke Trevor died. Yuh couldn't have run that place single-handed anyways, and yuh can't buck up agin Flannery and Lem Cleaver, that's sure."

"And this Strange feller, he'll git his medicine sooner than he looks for, when that rustlin' gang starts in again," grinned Wallie Knight.

"You still got that strip of range yore dad owned, and you can git something for that from Lem," said Eph Logan. "Ain't s'prisin' that Strange feller helped you fight off them rustlers, seein' how it was his own steers he was fightin' for."

But Ray argued on, fighting down the sobs that would not be restrained. "It's the worst thing I've ever known," she said.

"I thought he was a friend who had happened to learn of the raid that they were planning, and wanted to help me," she went on, "and he—he looked like—like I'd thought Jim Trevor might have looked after all these years. And all the while he was tricking me. He tried to argue me into giving up the ranch, but I didn't dream he had a reason of his own for doing it."

"Yeah, the world's fuller of snakes than the mesquite bottoms," said Zeb.

"But what yuh're askin' us to do ain't plumb practical now, Miss Ray. Before yuh knowed that this feller had bought yuh out, maybe we could have helped yuh. But now Strange and Lem Cleaver have got the law on their side."

Ray looked at Eph and Wallie, who nodded their heads solemnly in agreement with Eph. That was the fact. Strange's purchase of the property had put matters on an altogether different footing.

"What's that?" demanded Wallie Knight suddenly, starting up, as footsteps were heard outside.

"Feller at the door," said Eph Logan. He rose and opened it, while Ray, her face deathly pale, clenched her hands nervously. Was it Jim Strange? Had he dared to come, in spite of all? Didn't he know that she was aware of his baseness, his abominable treachery.

Martha Knight, who had been sitting beside her, leaned toward her and patted her hand gently, her large, homely features alight with sympathy. "There, honey, it can't be helped," she said. "It's the way of the world. You can't trust none of them."

Ray didn't hear her. For it was Jim. He stepped inside, announcing himself cheerily by the name he had assumed, as Eph opened the door. He strode toward the girl. "Evenin', Miss Ray, I got your note," he began.

He stopped, recoiled as Ray sprang to her feet, livid with anger. "I've learned since what you've done, what your motives were in helping me last night!" she cried, in tones that stung like whips. "You traitor, you wretched tool of Lem Cleaver's! I knew you were playing some game of your own! I told you so!"

Jim had expected expostulations, which his explanation was to make clear, but nothing like this wild scorn and vituperation. He looked helplessly about him, at the grim faces of the nesters. It was perfectly evident what they thought about the matter.

"I reckon you'd best let me explain," he began, a grim look about his mouth.

"Best thing you can do, young

strange feller, is to snap outer here," shrilled Martha Knight.

"Let him say what he's got to say," Eph Logan intervened. "No more than a feller's right. Go ahead, and git through with it."

Jim grinned mirthlessly. "Didn't exactly expect this sort of reception when I come here to talk things over," he answered. "As for bein' a tool of Lem Cleaver's, I reckon he's the tool, without knowin' it. I was goin' to explain just why I bought in the ranch over your head, Miss Ray, rather than let it fall into Cleaver's hands. But just now—well, I don't feel so much like explainin'."

Wallie Knight burst out into a snickering laugh. Eph cut him short.

"Well, seein' as how yuh got nothin' to say, I'll say somethin' short and to the point," he answered, "and that's good evenin'."

But there was something so menacing in the look Jim turned upon him that the sneer died on his face. Jim turned to Ray, who was standing facing him, her eyes darting fires of contemptuous anger.

"Your father bought in that ranch because he felt he owed recompense to his former friend, Luke Trevor," he cried. "I bought it in to-day because I wanted to return that favor, and do something more. Something to help all the valley. That ranch was my father's. I'm Jim Trevor. That's all!"

He turned toward the door. For an instant not a sound was to be heard in the room. Then Eph Logan was on his feet, gasping at Jim's arm.

"You're Jim Trevor?" he yelled. "Look at him, fellers! He's come back—the skunk, the hound, the—"

"No, no!" Ray had flung herself between them. "Jim, it's you! I should have recognized you if anybody did! It's not true, Eph! Jim, let me speak to you! Listen to me!"

But Jim was beyond listening. He broke from the girl's grasp, plunged through the entrance to where his horse was standing, and leaped into the saddle. In a moment he was riding like a madman over the range, hearing the calls from the house behind him, but ignorant of what they meant. Eph Logan's outburst, and Ray Clouston's intervention were alike meaningless to him.

Quickly the sounds died. Jim had ridden about a mile when he reined in.

What was he going to do? His immediate impulse in his indignation was to abandon the whole plan, his second, to carry it through.

In a minute or two he had begun to make his plans. He would ride to Las Vegas and see Nat Fergus, and any other of the mining men who held stock in the Penasco Valley Company. First, though, he must get his things from the Paradise House, and settle his account there.

Jim did not expect any difficulty with Flannery. As he saw things, his purchase of the ranch made his life considerably more valuable to the crowd, for the present, than his dead body. Still, he rode prepared for whatever might happen.

"Looks like Alto Verde never sleeps," he muttered, as he dismounted in front of the saloon and threw the reins loosely over the hitching-rack, squeezing his pinto into the only unoccupied space. He strode inside.

Tom Baines caught his eye and nodded, then bent busily over the bottle he was uncorking. Lew Tunnery snatched up a tray and went slinking into the dance hall, which was jammed.

"Checkin' out to-night," said Jim, striding up to the bar. "What's the damage?"

A man jostled him, suddenly enough to make him lose his balance. Another pushed him back, cursing. Jim's fist shot out, and the fellow went reeling to the floor. Jim turned. A knot had gathered round him. He saw Red, Al, and Scotty with the bandaged hand, their faces dark with menace, guns in their hands.

"Throw 'em up pronto, hombre!" snarled a voice behind him.

Jim turned, to see Sheriff White covering him with a blunt-nosed derringer.

"Throw 'em up sky-high," the sheriff yelled. "I arrest yuh, Jim Trevor, for the wilful, cowardly, sneakin' murder of Luke Trevor, yore father!"

A HAZE floated before Jim's eyes. His blood seemed to become liquid ice. He didn't understand—not quite, though vaguely his subconscious mind was grappling with the sheriff's meaning, and taking in Marsh's mysterious warning, and Eph Logan's outburst. Still, even if he had quite understood, he might still have just stood there, stunned into helplessness.

It was blind rage that came to his relief, but it was the man he had knocked down who saved his life by springing to his feet and coming back, mad with anger, plunging like a steer into the setting of the picture.

As the sheriff staggered back a pace under the impetus of this man's charge, Jim saw his chance. With a roar of fury he sprang. The heavy, old-fashioned gun in White's hand barked, but the extra charge of powder jerked up the barrel, and the bullet, grazing Jim's scalp, embedded itself in the opposite wall.

Next moment Jim had swung his six-gun and brought it crashing down on White's head. The sheriff dropped like a log.

The jostling crowd, jammed tightly against the bar, was unable to fire, while those in the dance hall, attracted by the shouting and the sound of the discharged derringer, came running in. In a moment the whole space in front of the bar was packed with a struggling mass of men. If all there had been combatants, Jim's shrift would have been a brief one. But the spectators, who had known nothing of the plot, impeded Flannery's gang, and through the press Jim fought his way.

He fought like the madman he had become, fought with the desperate resolve to win to freedom. Under the blows of his six-gun, men toppled before him. Now he was free of the jam. A bottle, hurled by Baines, smashed against the wall beside him, and the flying fragments cut his cheek.

Yelling, the pack tried to close in on him. He turned, blood streaming from his face, sweeping his revolver in a wide arc, and they fell back. He saw the man Red, head thrust forward between the bodies of two others, taking aim, and, as a spurt of orange fire leaped from his weapon, the gangster slumped to the floor, shot through the thigh, bringing down the man on either side of him in his fall.

Then Jim was at the door. He turned, and the baying crowd shrank back under the menace of that smoking gun.

"I'm comin' back!"

There was something fearful in the sight of the man, in the hiss of his voice. He dominated them, that lonely figure standing there, with the leveled gun and the eyes, mere pin points in the death-white face with the blood streaming down one cheek.

"I'm comin' back. Remember that, you hell hounds! If he ain't dead, he'll pay—for what he said!"

Then Jim was gone, and in a flash had jerked the reins off the hitching-rack and was in the saddle.

And with his disappearance the terror and awe that he had inspired dissolved. From every door of the gaudy den they streamed forth, Flannery's gang, with Flannery at their head, half insane with rage, miners and punchers, eager for the excitement of the chase. They tore at the halters of their plunging horses, cursing as they strove to get them free and mount.

But Jim was already mounted, and was forcing his way through the street crowds, which leaped aside in terror at the sight of him, none daring to attempt to stay him.

Only one man fired, and he was a city salesman, passing through Alto Verde. He had never owned a gun in his life until that morning, and now, standing in the doorway of a rival honkytonk,

and taking in the situation, he emptied his cylinder in reckless glee.

And it was one of his bullets that struck Jim behind the shoulder and passed out under his arm. Jim reeled as he rode, then gathered up the reins, looked back, and, seeing the half-drunken townsman leering from the doorway, forbore to fire in return.

He was going to need his bullets. At the shock of the wound his left arm had gone numb, and he could feel the blood streaming down his side in a steady flow. But he was out of the main street now, and well in advance of the yelling mob that was following on his trail. The pinto, though he had been ridden hard that day, seemed to understand his master's need, and raced ahead with long and steady strides.

The last of the adobe huts had fallen away. Jim was on the range, heading for the mesquite lands behind the neck of the pass. Behind him he could hear the shouts of his pursuers. He turned. In the light of the stars he could see something like a dozen men bunched together, about an eighth of a mile behind him.

They would be Flannery's men, no doubt, for Flannery's men were the best mounted. There was no need to consider the straggling mob that was probably coming on behind. Would the pinto make the mesquite, in which a man might lose himself? His flanks were heaving, and he was tossing foam from the bit, but there was no slowing of that steady stride.

The line of derricks came into sight. Jim galloped past them, turned right, away from the range, toward the broken lands.

Already the tongues of the mesquite scrub were thrusting out toward him, but he had a mile yet to go before it would be thick enough to conceal him, before he could find shelter in one of the innumerable canyons that criss-crossed the country.

All the while Jim felt that steady trickle down his side. The world was beginning to swim around him, the stars circled foolishly, drunkenly.

What was that Sheriff White had said? That he had killed his father! That wild rage that had possessed him burned in him again, giving him new strength. He looked back. Two of his pursuers had detached themselves from the ruck of the mob, and were overtaking him. Jim reined in suddenly. They were almost within revolver distance, and, not expecting the sudden maneuver, came galloping on.

They saw now, and they fired blindly from their saddles, tried to rein in. The bullets sang harmlessly overhead and to the side. Jim took slow aim, pressed trigger, and Al, the foremost of the two, went down with a bullet through the shoulder, while his horse, suddenly freed from the tug of the reins, caromed into that of the second gangster, and the two went down together.

A respite—a brief respite; but already the rest of the pursuers were drawing nearer. Their yells burst out in frantic chorus as they saw the two leaders down. They spread, endeavoring to circle and cut off Jim's flight. He was riding again, bending low over the pinto's neck, calling to him, encouraging him.

"Do your best, horse," he muttered thickly. "We'll best them. We've got to make it, horse, because we're comin' back."

And he pointed to the mesquite, black against the night sky, and now so near. And the pinto put his last ounce of strength and speed into the struggle.

They were nearing him. A swarm of bullets buzzed about his head like bees. One thudded into the saddle horn, another grazed the horse's flank. And Jim, turning to empty his revolver, knew that he had missed, for he could see nothing clearly in that mazy whirl. But now the dark mesquite had closed about him, and he was riding up a canyon that had opened before him.

Clattering over loose stones, scrambling up slopes of slippery shale, the

pinto struggled. Behind him Jim heard the baffled shouts of his pursuers. He was drawing away. A plunge through the matted growth that all but swept Jim from the saddle, a scramble along a coulee, and the shouts grew fainter, far to the right. Jim knew that he was safe for the moment.

A trail disclosed itself, and he put his horse along it, traveling for five minutes more. The cries were growing infrequent, and very faint. Safe now, at last, but Jim was reeling in the saddle. Safe from pursuit—to die alone in this scrub wilderness.

He reined in in a little open space, tried to dismount, slipped, and, unable to regain his feet, sprawled forward upon the ground. His limbs relaxed, his eyes closed. Consciousness went out. The tall mesquite closed in over him. Nobody riding by would have guessed the secret that it held beneath its spiny branches.

CHAPTER IX

Friend and Foe

"YES, I've heard about it all. Why did you think it necessary to come here to tell this to me?" Ray Clouston stood in the doorway of the ranch house, facing Flannery, who had arrived in his eight-cylinder car, a minute before.

"I'll tell you why, Miss Ray. Because that feller was in cahoots with you. He'd been seen hangin' about here the night before, and then he was up to Eph Logan's and—"

"Well, you've wasted your time bringing me that news, because I heard of it two hours ago." Ray kept her face masklike, resolved that nothing Flannery could say should bring a tear to her eyes. But Flannery, already primed with a few drinks, misinterpreted her apparent indifference.

"Well, I sure thought that feller had been makin' up to you," he said. "Course a girl like you hadn't no use for that skunk who murdered his own dad, sneakin' back after eight years and stealin' that wad from his dead body. Jim Trevor's dead sure enough. Dropped into a canyon after losin' most all the blood in his body."

Flannery said nothing of his secret doubts, or of the men whom he had sent out to scour the mesquite, though these, convinced that the task of finding Jim's body was an impossible one, were at the moment drinking aguardiente under a tree.

"Jim Trevor was nothing to me," answered Ray coldly; "but when you say that he murdered his father, you're lying, and you know it."

Under the blaze of Ray's gray eyes Flannery let his own drop. "Well, Miss Ray, I don't think none the worse of you for refusin' to think evil of nobody," he said. "But it wasn't jest to tell you about Jim Trevor's death I came this mornin'. You and Lem Cleaver been at sort of loggerheads over this ranch, and I'd like for to straighten it out."

Again he faltered under Ray's penetrating gaze. No use trying to fool this girl. Her beauty, her inaccessibility, and the drinks he had taken made him desperate.

"Now see here, Ray, what's the use of bearin' a grudge over a little matter of business?" he said. "What you don't realize is that new times has come to the Penasco Valley.

"Things is goin' to hum here soon, and it's Will Flannery and not Lem Cleaver who's goin' to be the big frog in the puddle. I'm goin' to take over this ranch and build me the swell place of the county. And I want you to share it with me, Ray. You know, since my wife died, three years ago, I ain't looked at another woman, and when I saw you—"

Ray had retreated as he advanced, until she was in the room, Flannery across the sill. She wrenched her arm away indignantly as he tried to grasp it.

"I don't want to hear any more of this, Mr. Flannery," she cried. "Not even if you hadn't been the cause of all the trouble that has come upon my

father and myself. Not if you were an honest man. I hate you. Let go my arm and leave this house!"

Flannery's eyes glowed with admiration. "You little devil, I'm sure crazy about you!" he cried, catching her in his arms. "You're a little wildcat, but I'll tame you, and you'll learn to love me when you're the queen of Penasco County—"

He bent his face toward hers, and the little wildcat countered with a stinging punch that jerked it back and drew blood from his lip. Flannery's temper, never very amenable to control, got the better of him.

"Damn you, I'll show you you can't git away with that stuff!" he roared. "I want you, and I ain't never been balked by any woman yet."

Again he seized her, and next moment Ray was screaming and struggling desperately for freedom. She dashed her fists into his face, but could not break his hold. The room was whirling round her, she felt herself weakening; Flannery's leering face and bloodshot eyes glared out of a thickening fog.

Out of that fog something else took shape. It was a pitcher of water standing on the table. Ray relaxed for an instant, let Flannery drag her nearer it, then grasped it and swung it with all her might in Flannery's face.

Half stunned by the impact, and blinded by the water, Flannery relaxed his hold. Next moment Ray had darted through the open doorway into the kitchen and snatched up the revolver that she kept on the shelf.

"Leave this house in ten seconds or I'll fire!" she cried, and, though her body was trembling, her right arm seemed rigid as a rock. Flannery turned and ran.

"I'll get you, Ray Clouston!" he yelled, shaking his fist as he climbed into his car.

Ray waited till the sound of the motor receded into the distance, then sank down, limp and helpless.

It was Martha Knight who had brought her the news that morning that Jim had been shot down in the mesquite. According to the story, he had fallen dead into a scrub-grown canyon. "It's the best thing could have happened to him," she said. "He'd have been lynched sure, the murderin' divvil."

"Martha, Jim never killed his own father," said Ray, when she had recovered from the first stunning effect of this information. "I always told you that. He was incapable of such a thing."

"I'd like to believe that, Miss Ray," answered Martha. "But you know what he threatened when he left home eight years ago. And he was reckernized in town that night, and he told that Mex woman he met how he'd got to git out of Alto Verde *pronto*.

"And Luke Trevor had been robbed of a big wad of money, which he'd had when he left town. And didn't Jim Trevor come back under another name and buy this ranch over yore head, thinkin' he wouldn't be reckernized?"

"Jim Trevor never killed his father, and I don't want ever to hear you say that about him again," said Ray, in tears.

She was thinking of Jim's tenderness to her that night after the raid, and though his treachery in buying the ranch over her head was incomprehensible to her, she remembered him as the boy whom she had loved secretly for years.

She had always loved him, and he had never suspected it, and it was she who had persuaded her father to secure the option on the ranch after Luke Trevor's murder. And this was how Jim had rewarded her!

The few steers that remained were her own, but their value would have to be reckoned in the final settlement a month away. Ray determined to stick to the end, though there was nothing she could do now.

Flannery, for his part, returning to Alto Verde, half mad with chagrin, resolved to let the girl alone until after

the stockholders' meeting. No need to raid her steers now that Jim Trevor was gone. When the more moderate element in control of the company had been ousted by an unexpected vote, for which he had made all the plans, he would be in a position to work his will in the valley.

And then Ray would be his.

Meanwhile the days passed into weeks. One day a stranger came to the ranch house. He laughed when he saw Ray confronting him, a revolver in her hand, but the laugh faded as he saw how tired and worn she looked.

"Mornin', Miss Clouston; I reckon you don't know me. Name's Nat Fergus," said the stranger.

"No, I don't know you," answered Ray, still keeping him covered.

"Friend of Jim Trevor's," said Nat. And that might have meant more than one thing. But he looked so big and comforting, and his smile was so infectious that Ray put back the revolver in its holster.

"Now that looks a heap better," Nat smiled. "I'm the minin' engineer over to Las Vegas. Those crooks in the Paradise House doped me and trimmed me for nearly ten thousand dollars by cheatin' at poker. Jim Trevor was there, and he accused the feller who was dealin' the cards from the bottom of the deck. Both drew, and Jim blew off the tip of the feller's finger.

"Well, Miss Clouston, it's this way. Of course I heard the news about Jim, and just as soon as I could get away I made up my mind to ride over and see you, on account of all the talk that's goin' on about Jim's havin' bought out your ranch. Now I know Jim Trevor wasn't no crook nor yet a murderer; and if I'd been in the Paradise House that night of the fight, they'd never have got him."

"Thank you," said Ray, so earnestly that Nat looked at her keenly. He was the first person that had had a kind word to say about Jim. And the tears welled up and began streaming down her cheeks.

"I never understood why he bought this ranch so secretly over my head, after helping me fight off that rustling gang," she said. "But it was his father's ranch once. Maybe he thought he was doing the right thing. I don't know. But what's the use of thinking about it now he—he—" Her voice broke, and the big man patted her hand.

"I'm glad you ain't against Jim Trevor," he said huskily. "We'd only met once, but I know he'd have made the best pard a fellow ever had. I wanted to set his mem'ry right with you. By the way, you don't happen to have none of that Penasco Valley oil stock, do you, Miss Clouston?"

"I've got quite a few shares of it, but it's worthless—"

"Not by heck it ain't, Miss Clouston. It's been goin' up steady for weeks past. Now that night in Alto Verde Jim Trevor said to me—there wasn't time to say much—how he'd got an idea of gettin' hold of all the stock he could, and votin' out the Flannery and Cleaver gang at the stockholders' meetin' Friday.

"I've got a bunch, and some of the other fellers at Las Vegas, and we're all plumb sore at the way that gang ran down the value of the stock so as to buy in and start operatin' again. Hear they're wakin' up to the fact that they ain't got majority control. You know anybody else has got any?"

"Why, most everybody in town bought some," answered Ray; "but most of them got rid of it. But I know Eph Logan is holding on to a few shares, and Zeb Handley, and Mr. Marsh, the storekeeper, and—yes, there's the postmaster, Mr. Warren. You mean you want to buy it in?"

"Not exactly, Miss Ray; but I want yore proxies. Each share of stock counts for one vote, and if I can git a bunch of votes, maybe there'll be enough to vote that crew out of office Friday. You get me? Of course, there ain't much chance of it; but it's worth tryin', and a bunch of our fellers are

goin' to be there, in case Flannery starts any roughhouse business."

"I'll help you in every way I can," Ray answered, "for—for Jim's sake."

And during those last days before the momentous meeting a strange new spirit began to stir in Alto Verde. An underground movement was in progress that boded ill for Flannery and Lem Cleaver.

From safes and desks here and there, by fives and tens, a surprising quantity of shares were gathered, and for each share a proxy was delivered to Nat Fergus.

Marsh, the storekeeper; Warren, the postmaster, bitter enemies of Flannery, yet afraid to come out openly against him; Eph Logan, Zeb Handley, all contributed to the fast-mounting total, which was swelled by the proxies from Las Vegas miners.

Lem Cleaver, with his ear always to the ground, sensed that new spirit of revolt, and tried to warn Flannery. "Notice how independent Alto Verde's growin'?" he asked him. "Some of those fellers will bear watchin'. Marsh refused to contribute to the Citizens' Welfare Fund this morning."

"We'll fix those fellers after we git that Xavier crowd out," said Flannery. "We got thirty-two per cent of the stock against their fifteen, accordin' to yore estimate. And the small fry that holds the balance—they don't know nothin'."

"Twenty-seven per cent," said Nat to Ray, a few days before the meeting. "Question is how many shares the company controls.

"I hear there's a crowd of speculators in St. Louis and Kansas City have got wise to what's in the air, and they've picked up quite a block, and are holdin' on to it. But they ain't likely to try to get control till they see how the cat jumps. The Penasco Valley Company is very small potatoes to those fellows. Well, we've done all we can."

"We've done our best," said Ray. She had become infected with that new spirit of revolt. She had grown almost light-hearted.

Only at night, lying awake, she would sometimes weep bitterly when she thought of what might have been. That love for Jim, which had never quite vanished during all the years of his absence, had taken possession of her again completely. If only she had known who he was that night of the raid—if only she had not driven him from her with scorn and hatred! That was the hardest thing of all to bear.

CHAPTER X

Lew's Confession

"SO you come here arter all, Jim Trevor," grinned old Tom Knowles, as he set down the basin of bread and milk.

"Might have done worse. Yore arm's doin' fine, and thar ain't no bone bruk, but you sure did bleed. Bleedin' still when I picked you up. Now you lay still. Three days ain't nothin' when a feller's lost most all the blood in his body. It'll be three weeks afore you're a well hombre again."

"My horse!" Jim muttered.

"I got him tied in the strip of range back of this shack, and nobody ain't goin' to work through the mesquite lookin' for horses hereabouts. Yeah, if I hadn't happened to be here and heard that firin', I reckon yore bones would be bleachin' down in that gulch by now."

Jim lay still without answering. He had lain unconscious for two days in Tom Knowles' shack, and, as Tom had said, it was the sheerest good luck that had brought him within hearing distance of the old hermit. It was still better luck that had brought Tom Knowles to the spot where Jim lay, in the tiny clearing in the mesquite.

As the days passed, Jim grew slowly stronger. With returning strength came the desire to resume the task that he had undertaken. He chafed with every day's delay; at the same time he realized that until his wound had en-

tirely healed, and his strength was fully restored, it would be folly to leave Tom's cabin.

If he could get word to Nat Fergus! But to entrust a message to old Tom was impossible, for Jim had quickly discovered that the old man was suffering from a sort of periodical insanity. Fortunately, at the time he rescued Jim, Tom was sane enough, but five nights later he returned from wandering through the mesquite in much the same condition as when Jim had encountered him at the derricks, while riding out to Ray's ranch.

He glared at Jim as if he did not know him.

"What's the matter, Tom?" asked Jim. "Where have you been?"

"Where've I been? Lookin' at them fake oil wells those skunks drilled, to git the savin's of suckers like me," babbled the old man. He grasped Jim by the arm.

"Listen! I got them devils whar I want 'em. I'm tellin' you because I kin trust you. Nobody else knows, not even Marsh. I put cans of nitroglycerine down all them fake wells what they stopped jest short of the ile so as they could purtend thar warn't no ile on the place."

He pulled a small, rounded, weighty piece of iron from a pocket.

"This is goin' to fix them skunks some day," he bawled. "Yeah, this here go-devil, as they call 'em. I'm waitin' till they start drillin' ag'in, and then I'm goin' to drop this down on the nitro, and then—blooey! I'll send that gang whar they sent my savin's. Naw, I ain't got no stock left now. Lem Cleaver got mine long ago for a song."

In Tom's periods of insanity he seemed oblivious to everything but his wrongs. He would wander through the mesquite, always directing his steps toward the derricks, but he made no attempt to go into town. Two or three such crises had eventuated since Jim became his guest.

Meanwhile Jim was eating out his heart with anxiety.

A premature attempt to ride the pinto had resulted in the bursting of a small blood-vessel under his arm, and it was another week before he was strong enough to try the experiment again. Only a week remained before the stockholders' meeting. Come what might, he must get to Las Vegas and see Nat Fergus.

Tom, in a lucid interval, had gone into town to get some more supplies from Marsh. Jim had ridden along a trail through the mesquite to get his bearings. He knew roughly where the cabin was situated, but the scrub, in places almost impenetrable, stretched clear to the foothills of the Guadalupes. From the crest of a ridge not far away Jim hoped to be able to get a better survey of the country.

He dismounted at the bottom and made his way up the stony side. It was early afternoon, the heat of the sun was tanged by a cool breeze from the mountains. In the distance Jim could see Alto Verde—vulture or octopus—with its tentacles extending into the wide circle of green range. Beyond that other crest was the ranch house. Jim was looking at it longingly, wondering whether Ray was still holding on, when he saw something moving through the scrub about a quarter of a mile away.

As it passed a clearing he saw that it was a solitary rider, heading, not for the range, but apparently for the heart of the mesquite thickets.

To the rangeman, such a sight is always of significance. Immediately Jim hurried down the slope and, getting into the saddle, turned the pinto in such a direction that he could hope to intercept the rider at the head of a canyon, which apparently he would have to traverse.

Reaching his objective, Jim dismounted and waited. In a few minutes he heard a horse pushing through the mesquite. He gripped the pinto's upper lip to prevent its neighing, and, peering out through the scrub, saw that the rider was Lew Tunnery.

Lew Tunnery, with his soft speech and sneaking ways, had always seemed evil itself to Jim. Even then, at the sight of him, he felt disgust.

"Wonder what that feller's doin' here," he muttered, and then of a sudden he remembered something that Tom Knowles had said to him, in Marsh's store, about his shack being on the trail taken by the rustlers.

"He's takin' them a message from Flannery, I'll bet a dollar," Jim gritted through his teeth.

He waited till Tunnery was a considerable distance ahead of him before remounting and following. The canyon ended in an ascending trail that led to a sparsely grown mesa, extending into the distance.

On either side of this long strip of land was almost impenetrable mesquite. So far as Jim knew, nobody had been aware of its existence when he had lived in the district.

Lew Tunnery came into sight again, a small figure, mounted another rise, now half a mile in front. But Jim did not quicken his pace. He could see that the trail he was following was well defined, stamped out by cattle. And now he realized that it was the cattle that had made the long strip of clearing, by trampling their way through the manzanita.

The trail ran on for more than an hour. From time to time Jim saw Lew in the distance, then he would lose sight of him as the trail dipped.

Suddenly the pursuit ended. Jim found himself looking down into a sort of large, sunken bowl like the crater of an extinct volcano. It was perhaps two miles across, and almost denuded of trees.

There was range grass, and, again there was a growth of mesquite, scattered in clumps here and there. And the bowl was full of cattle, more than a thousand of them, as Jim estimated, grazing on the grass and on the leaves and pods of the mesquite, which alone would have sufficed to keep them in condition.

Lew Tunnery was riding down the slope of the bowl, and two men were riding up to meet him.

Jim grinned, rode back a little way, and slipped off his horse. Then, returning, he crouched, gun in hand, behind a clump of scrub upon the lip of the crater. He saw Lew rein in and enter into lengthy conversation with the two cattle guards. Then he rode back, and the two men disappeared among the steers.

Lew Tunnery rode up to the crater's lip, to find himself confronted by a six-gun within two inches of his stomach. His face turned a sickly green, his mouth began to open.

"Don't yell," said Jim softly. "You wouldn't look pretty if you did, Lew."

"My God, Jim Trevor, it wasn't me that—" Lew began.

"We'll keep the explanations a while," answered Jim. "Ride on slow."

He patted him as he spoke, to discover weapons, but Lew was unarmed. There was nothing of the badman about Lew Tunnery, except his disposition.

Jim made him halt while he got on his horse, and rode back with him halfway to the cabin. Then he ordered him to dismount again, and followed suit.

"You like bein' alive, Lew?" he asked his prisoner.

Lew moistened his pale lips and nodded.

"You'd best come through, then. No lyin'. Won't help you a mite. What was you doin' in that rustlers' hangout, and who sent you?"

"I—I didn't—"

Jim prodded him gently with the muzzle of his six-gun. "Don't trouble to think up lies, I warned you. What did Flannery send you there for?"

"He—they—those steers are to be brought back to your ranch as soon as the shareholders— I thought you were dead, Jim."

"Told you not to think. No need to strain yourself. Yeah, soon as Flannery and Lem Cleaver get control of the whole valley. Well, Lew, maybe they will, and maybe they won't."

Jim's face was like a madman's. Lew Tunnery, wailing, flung himself upon his knees and screamed a prayer for mercy.

For a moment he read death in those merciless agate eyes that pierced him through and through. For a moment Jim's finger quivered upon the trigger. When he spoke, his voice was the most terrible sound that had ever struck upon Lew's ears.

"Where's the gold-plating on that cuff button—same as the other?"

Lew glanced down, stupefied. "It—it came off some time," he stammered. "I couldn't find it."

"Know where you lost it?"

"N-n-n-no," chattered Lew.

"It dropped beside my father's body when you—murdered him. Your time's come, Lew Tunnery!"

"No, no, for God's sake, listen!" screamed Lew, his frantic terror rendering him voluble. "It wasn't me. It was Sheriff White. I swear I had nothing to do with it. I wasn't there."

"Go on!"

"Flannery wanted him out of the way because he was making trouble about the oil stock and had threatened to go to the governor. And there was some trouble with Lem Cleaver about the ranch. Lem wouldn't hear of what Flannery wanted to do, but Flannery turned the screws on him, and he had to keep quiet afterward. Sheriff White knew if he killed your father he'd be reelected."

"Go on!"

"Your father hadn't an enemy in the valley, not a real one. Then Flannery thought of you. He'd been told you'd threatened to take his life. Him and the sheriff made me go to Xavier and come back by the stage, with a suitcase with your name on it, and throw out hints so folks should think you'd come back secretly and murdered him."

"Go on!"

"I was scared. They made me do it, but when I'd done it I wanted to warn your dad. I rode after him, and found him dead, shot through the heart."

"Go on!"

"I knelt down by him and my sleeve caught in his belt. I thought he'd come to life again." Lew's face was white with terror at the remembrance. Jim put his gun away.

"I think you ain't lyin' now, Lew," he said. "I'm goin' to let you put that in writin'. Mount and ride on!"

The sun was setting when Jim reached the cabin. Tom Knowles had not returned. Jim made his captive go inside. Then he found a piece of packing paper and gave Lew his fountain pen.

"You're goin' to write a confession," he said. "Later it'll be signed and witnessed. Write down all that you told me."

Lew offered no objection. He had just reached the end when Jim saw three riders approaching the little clearing through the mesquite.

Hand upon six-gun, he ran to the door. Then he stopped in amazement. One was Tom Knowles, his saddle fringed with purchases, the second was Nat Fergus, and the third—Ray.

And it was Ray who sprang from her horse and ran forward, hands outstretched, sobbing, "Jim, I thought you were dead!"

Then—well, for a moment Jim forgot the presence of Tom Knowles and Nat, and Lew Tunnery who was looking on, white-faced, from the door of the shack. And Ray forgot too, and then drew herself away, her pretty face suffused with blushes.

"IT'S this way, Jim," said Nat, when he had done wringing Jim's hand, and Tom had been set as guard over the prisoner. "We thought you were dead, and Miss Ray here—well, I guess she's mighty glad you ain't. But we weren't goin' to let your work drop—no, sir.

"I came to see her, to tell her what had been in your mind about them shares, and we've been gettin' proxies from every stockholder we can lay hands on. We've just about scoured

the whole country between here and Las Vegas. And we figure we've got twenty-seven per cent."

"That downs us," said Jim. "The company had thirty a month ago. Must have been buyin' heavily since."

"How d'you know, Jim?"

"Overheard Lem Cleaver tellin' Flannery. But how did you happen to come here?"

"Old Marsh, the storekeeper, is in with us. Tom Knowles told him about you. He told me, and I spread the good news to Miss Ray. Say, Jim"—he looked cautiously to where the girl was lighting some sticks to build a fire—"I never saw a girl so wild with joy as she was. Nothing would do but I must bring her here at once.

"I went back to Marsh's, and as luck would have it, Tom Knowles was there. And that's the story. Who's the fellow with the death's head? Ain't I seen him hangin' around Paradise House?"

Jim told him the story of the afternoon, and Ray was taken into their counsel.

"It all depends on who wins out at the stockholders' meetin', seems to me," said Fergus. "I guess you ain't been back long enough to know what the political situation is.

"Flannery and Lem Cleaver, and the crowd in Xavier, are linked up with big interests at the state capital. If they win, they'll be able to stop an investigation altogether, or to hold it up long enough to do what they want with the Penasco Valley.

"Our only hope is in bestin' them. If we can do that, feelin's runnin' so high in Alto Verde that it looks like the people will rise up and throw the whole crooked gang out of town, if nothin' worse.

"Yes, everything hangs on that, gettin' back the cattle, and straightenin' out the situation about the sales and mortgages and all. Now we got to consider ways and means—"

"And, as I told you," said Jim, "our twenty-seven per cent ain't enough; maybe for all we know Cleaver and Flannery have managed to buy back a majority of the shares."

"I doubt it," said Nat. "They started too late. Folks got canny and held on, when they found the stock was shootin' skyward."

Suddenly Jim grasped Nat's arm. "I wrote to New York to a stockbroker, to have him buy me shares up to the value of forty thousand dollars," he said. "If he has done that—and whether he has or not—there ought to be a letter waiting for me at the post office. Warren wouldn't dare turn it over to that crowd."

"He's in with us," said Nat. "Gave me proxies on a dozen shares."

"I'll ride in—"

"I guess not, Jim. You can't afford to show your face in Alto Verde till we're ready to spring the mine. Nope, if there's a letter there, I'll get it from Warren. I'll have to tell him you're alive—but Warren can be trusted.

"Now here's my plan," Nat continued. "We'll have to keep this fellow Tunnery a close prisoner till the day of the meetin'. Tom Knowles will see to that. And you're goin' to handle the matter of the proxies. Yes, sir, you're goin' to ride right straight into Alto Verde, with a bodyguard of six of my miners, and you're goin' into the meetin', and you're goin' to do your best to vote out Flannery and his gang.

"Meanwhile, I'm goin' to post a couple of dozen more of my men around the Paradise House. Everything unostentatious, and, if possible, we'll keep that crowd in the dark until they find themselves out of jobs. Then—"

"Then," said Jim, "I shall have a job to finish so far as Sheriff White is concerned."

"He ain't no sheriff," grinned Nat. "The elections law was never complied with when he was picked, and, anyway, the state law required sheriffs to be voted for every two years, and that wasn't done.

"Don't you bother about the legal end of it, Jim. I'm handlin' that, and

we've got a committee of public safety ready to take over the government just as soon as we get the drop on that crowd."

"And if they beat us?" asked Jim.

Nat grinned. "Won't make no difference when my minin' crowd gets busy. We came into this fight slow, but by heck we're in for the finish."

CHAPTER XI

Alto Verde Comes to Order

"THAT feller Fergus is a cool fish, and I don't feel nohow comfortable with him around," remarked Flannery to Lem Cleaver. "Playin' some sort of game, it seems to me."

"What makes you think that?" asked the banker, as he sat in Flannery's office.

"Been comin' in for some nights now, buckin' the wheel and dancin' with the girls. No poker games, though. Asked Scotty how his hand was doin'. Brung in that minin' crowd of his every time. And Tom Baines says they ain't drinkin'—not so as you could notice."

"Well, if they're planning any roughhouse business, I guess you're ready for them, ain't you, Flannery?"

"Oh, sure! Only I don't like it exactly. Those fellows are sore because they sold their stocks before prices rose."

"You're sure they sold them?" asked Lem Cleaver.

"Dead sure. We've had our men out buying in every share that's to be had, and not one of them minin' men had a share to his name. All sold out at bottom prices. That's why I'm afraid they may be plannin' some disturbance at the meetin' to-morrer."

"What's worrying me," said the banker, "is that some of that Xavier crowd may be trying to put something over on us."

"Can't do it," answered Flannery. "We hold more than twice the number of their shares."

"Supposing some of the small holders have been getting together for a deal over there with the Xavier crowd?"

Flannery grinned. "You're lettin' yore imagination run away with you, Lem," he answered. "Nope, all that's worryin' me is havin' that Las Vegas crowd around. To-morrer we'll give the Xavier lot a surprise, when we vote 'em out of office. Will Flannery, president of Penasco Valley Oil Company; Lemuel Cleaver, vice-president.

"Don't that sound grand to you, Lem? All the same, I'm puttin' the hour for the meetin' a little ahead. Eleven o'clock to-morrer instead of twelve. I want to notify the bunch, Lem."

"I don't know if it's legal unless advertised," protested Cleaver.

"Legal be damned! If they don't like it, let 'em go to the courts. By the time the decision's handed down we won't be worryin'."

At the same time a significant meeting was being held in a private house in Xavier, thirty miles away. Five of those present were officials of the Penasco Company; the sixth was Nat Fergus.

"We're willin' to reelect you, conditional upon the terms I've outlined," Nat was saying. "Principally, the Flannery gang's got to go. Likewise, there will be proceedings to make them disgorge, especially Banker Cleaver. You've been hand in glove with them in the past—"

"That's strong language," interposed Lee Johnson, the president.

"But not too strong to meet the facts. We fellows ain't fools. We know where we stand, and without us you've got no chance of reelection. Flannery and Cleaver are out to grab the valley, as you know. Those proxies you let Cleaver gather in are strictly for Flannery and Cleaver."

"We'd like to consult about your proposition, Mr. Fergus," said Johnson, and Nat left the room. They called him in some twenty minutes later.

"You've laid your cards down, and we'll lay down ours," said Johnson. "We knew everything you've told us.

We're practically in your hands. We'll accept your terms and trust to you to do your best for us to-morrow. We've decided to place our proxies in your hands." Johnson controlled one of the most important mines at Las Vegas. Thus he, in turn, had the whip hand over the miners.

"Then I'll be ridin'," answered Nat.

The day of the meeting dawned with a sudden change of weather. Fall seemed to have come in earnest, and a thin mist filled the streets of Alto Verde.

At eleven o'clock the stockholders were gathering in the large assembly room over Lem Cleaver's bank. These consisted of three or four from Xavier, who had come over on the night coach, Lem and Flannery, two of the bank clerks, Eph Logan, and a man from a little settlement called Piñon, twenty miles distant. Finally, Nat Fergus.

He had learned of the change of hour by chance, a few minutes before eleven, and had sent one of his men galloping to warn Jim, at Eph Logan's house. Across the street several of Flannery's gang lounged in deck chairs, feet on rail, on the stoop of Paradise House. A dozen more, under the command of Sheriff White, were strategically disposed in the vicinity of the "business block."

"We'll take the minutes of the last meetin' as read," said Flannery, who had been voted into the presiding officer's chair. "Gentlemen, I'm goin' to forego the custom of readin' a report about what we've done last year.

"We ain't done much, as you all know. But we've been workin' hard to reestablish the company as a payin' proposition. We've issued some new stock, and we've made plans for fresh developments this comin' year. Anybody got anything to say before we come to the election of officers for the ensuin' year? Then we'll take the votes—"

"I'm risin' to a point of order," said Nat, getting on his feet. "This here meetin' was scheduled for twelve noon, and it ain't more than half-past eleven now. That ain't fair to any fellers who might have been plannin' to attend."

"You're out of order, Mr. Fergus," rasped out Flannery. "The hour was changed to meet the convenience of stockholders who wanted to catch the afternoon stage back to Xavier."

"But that stage don't start till three o'clock, so your argument don't amount to nothin'," said Nat.

"You're out of order, I'm tellin' you!" Flannery was beginning to smell a rat. "The chair will now receive nominations for the office of president for the ensuin' year."

"I nominate Mr. William Flannery for that office," spoke up one of the bank clerks, a tool of Cleaver's.

"I second that motion," said the other.

"Mr. William Flannery nominated and seconded for the office of president. Any other nominations?" yelled Flannery.

"I nominate Mr. Lee Johnson, of Xavier," said Nat. "In nominatin' him, I want to say—"

"Speeches ain't in order," shouted Flannery. "You got to nominate and let it go at that."

"Is that so?" Nat was fighting desperately for time. He glanced out of the window. Alto Verde seemed to sleep in the October sunshine, which had dissipated the mists of morning. Here and there a man lounged at a corner, and a group upon the Paradise House stoop had their feet up on the rail. But a little cloud of dust was rising out of the road. And through the dust Nat could see horsemen galloping.

"It's usual for nominatin' speeches to be allowed," protested Nat. "How in heck is this gatherin' to know whether Mr. William Flannery or Mr. Lee Johnson is goin' to make the better president?"

The gathering grinned. Flannery grew red. "You'll bow to the rulin' of the chair," he yelled.

"I'm risin' to another point of order,"

Nat intervened doggedly. "If you're offerin' yourself for election you got to vacate the chair."

"Rulin's against you. This here gatherin' has voted me to preside," Flannery shouted. "Mr. William Flannery and Mr. Lee Johnson nominated for president. Any other nominations for that office?"

The riders were coming on madly. They were in the main street, passing the adobe houses of the outskirts.

"No more nominations. We'll come to the vote, then. All stockholders holdin' proxies—"

Shouts outside, a single revolver shot that cracked through the still air. Galloping horses, a sudden fusillade.

"Show yore proxies!" screamed Flannery, whose instinct told him that his crisis had arrived. "Keep yore seats. We got to finish this nomination!"

Lem Cleaver leaped to his feet. "I'm laying down three thousand and two hundred proxies for you as president, Mr. Flannery," he shouted. "Clark, show your proxies!" He turned to one of his assistants.

Steps on the stairs. More shots. Hoarse yells that blanched the cheeks of those in the assembly room.

"Three thousand two hundred proxies for William Flannery. I declare William Flannery elected president!" Cleaver shouted.

"Not by heck, you don't. The other side ain't been heard from," yelled Nat Fergus, his bass voice drowning that of the other. He raised it louder. "Jim, your proxies, quick!"

The door burst open. Jim Trevor stood in the room, behind him three of Nat's miners, six-guns in hand.

"I'm voting three thousand seven hundred fifteen proxies for Lee Johnson, for president of the Penasco Valley Company," cried Jim.

FLANNERY'S next move was a characteristic one.

He wasted no time in argument. With a single flying leap he was across the room; with another, he was through the door. There followed a moment of stupefying silence.

Then pandemonium broke out upon the stairs, glass windows went smashing under a fusillade of revolver shots. Two more of Nat's miners appeared in the room, entering backward, while they fired down at the mob of Flannery's men. One of them was bleeding from a bullet wound in the wrist.

"Shut that door! Hold it! I'll put this meeting through." Nat Fergus leaped to the vacated seat at the head of the table. "Keep your seats! Keep your seats! We're goin' to have a quorum for this meetin', accordin' to law."

His revolver described an arc along the sides of the table, and Lem Cleaver and the two clerks, white with terror, crouched down in their chairs again. So did Eph Logan, the Xavier men, and the man who had come over from Piñon. But Eph Logan and the man from Piñon had broad smiles on their faces, and they, too, had six-guns in their hands. Nat Fergus spoke again:

"Hold that door! Mr. William Flannery, elected to preside, havin' vacated the chair, this meetin' will now proceed to elect another chairman. Mr. Nat Fergus is proposed by Mr. Lem Cleaver —thank you, Lem—and seconded by Mr. Logan. Proxies for the office of president will now be counted—hold 'em, fellers, hold 'em! I declare Mr. Lee Johnson duly elected. For vice-president—"

Seldom, if ever, was a stockholders' meeting brought to a successful termination quite so rapidly, or under circumstances of such difficulty. For the door, battered by logs of wood carried up the stairs, was rapidly yielding. From the upper windows of the Paradise House snipers were pouring a steady stream of bullets into the room, fortunately without danger to those inside, except from ricochets. Outside the hoarse voices of Flannery and Sheriff White could be heard, hounding on their mob.

From the windows of the assembly

room Nat's miners were firing back steadily, but also ineffectively. Through the widening crack of the door could be seen the savage faces of the gunmen.

"Hurry her up, Nat," called Jim. "They'll be through in a minute."

"For the office of recordin' secretary, Mr. James Foulkes, of Xavier. Any other nominations? I declare Mr. James Foulkes duly elected. For auditor—"

Crash! The door swung from its hinges and dropped sidewise, forming a barrier breast-high across the top of the stairs. A volley hissed into the room. One of the miners threw up his arms with a sigh and fell, shot through the heart. Lem Cleaver dropped beneath the table, followed by his clerks and the men from Xavier.

"And I declare this meetin' duly adjourned! We're with you, Jim." Nat, Eph Logan, and the man from Piñon whipped out guns and poured a stream of lead over the top of the door.

Suddenly the door fell flat. There came a rush. Through the smoke-filled air the little body of defenders saw their assailants plunge forward. Yells, shrieks, curses, the groans of wounded men, the thud of falling bodies, tangling with one another as they dropped!

It was too hot to last. Flannery's gunmen broke and ran. The smoke began to clear away. Jim, Nat, Eph Logan, and two of the miners were all the fighting force that remained. Two of the miners lay dead, two sprawled on the ground with the blood streaming from body wounds. Jim's cheek was chipped, Nat's forehead scored.

Outside, the chaos was increasing. All Alto Verde seemed to be mixing in. And the voices of Flannery and Sheriff White could still be heard, urging on their followers, themselves safe from danger.

Jim leaped out of the room, emptied his revolver into the fleeing mob below, and pulled the heavy door across the top of the stairs as a barrier. "We've got to hold 'em here, Nat," he shouted.

The five crouched down, reloading, waiting. Suddenly Flannery's voice broke the silence that had fallen within the building.

"We've got you fellers cold," he yelled. "We want the murderer—Jim Trevor. Bring him out and we'll let the rest of you go free. We've sent for dynamite."

And the thin voice of Lem Cleaver piped from the window of the assembly room in answer:

"For God's sake, don't blow us up, Flannery! We're trapped in here!"

An outburst of mocking laughter followed, but it was bitter laughter, changing to yells and curses. Suddenly the uproar in the street swelled to incredible volume. There followed a deafening rattle of firearms, cheers, shrieks, oaths, indescribable confusion. A mob came swarming up the stairs again.

"Don't shoot, fellers!" It was Marsh, the storekeeper, two bandoliers of cartridges around his body, a smoking revolver in either hand. "We're the Citizens' Committee. We've got them fellers on the run!"

A moment later, after dispatching volunteers to attend to their wounded in the assembly room, the men were in the street. From end to end it was packed with a jubilant, surging throng. For Alto Verde had risen against the gang that had so long held her in subjection, and Flannery's gunmen had disappeared.

"Where's Flannery?" demanded Jim of Marsh.

"Gone off in his car with Sheriff White and two of his men. Just made their getaway in time. We'll round them up, though. We're telegraphin' Xavier, and if they try to cross the Border—"

Jim said not a word. He dashed across the street toward the livery stable where he and the escort of miners had left their horses. Nat followed at his heels.

"Where you goin', Jim?"

Jim turned a white face upon him. "Ray," he whispered hoarsely. "That devil will get her, if he's makin' for

the Border. Road passes within a half mile of the ranch house!"

CHAPTER XII

The Kidnapers

JIM and Ray had both spent the previous evening at Eph Logan's house, but Eph himself had been in town with Nat Fergus, making the final arrangements for the citizens' committee. When Jim started for Alto Verde, the girl had returned to her own house. She was convinced that there would be no danger for her there. In a few hours the issue would be decided one way or the other.

"The other!" The thought of Jim exposed to fresh dangers in Alto Verde had been like a cold hand clutching at her heart. From the moment of their reunion they had known that they were all the world to each other. In their happiness all the sorrows of the past had been forgotten.

And now Jim had ridden once more into that trap at Alto Verde!

She felt that if anything went wrong with Jim she must receive the news at the ranch house that had been a home to both of them, and not at Eph Logan's.

She had watched the two men ride away, and, with Jim's kiss still fresh on her lips, she had mounted her horse and started back over the range. How placid it was in the misty autumn morning! It seemed incredible that Jim should have had to ride away like that, instead of just returning with her.

Reining in when she reached the hogback, she looked toward the town. The mists had cleared away, and in the far distance she thought she could distinguish Jim riding toward Alto Verde, and another horseman approaching him. The second man was, in fact, the messenger whom Nat Fergus had sent to tell Jim of the change in the time of the meeting.

A haze swept back over the horizon, both figures disappeared. Ray waited a little, and then, reassured that everything was all right, went on to the house.

She had the inner conviction that all would be well, and yet, as time went on, uneasiness began to stir in her again. She paced the stoop, following Jim in spirit, trying to reach out to him. And suddenly she started. She had heard a faint sound, very far away, that sent the blood draining from her cheeks.

She heard it again, and knew what it was. It was the crackle of firearms. And it was coming from the direction of Alto Verde!

The girl had not unsaddled her horse, and in a moment she had mounted and was riding back toward the hogback, which commanded a wide view of the range. From it one could see the road running from Alto Verde toward the frontier, a little-traveled track, in places little better than a cattle trail.

This road ran through the pass in which the derricks had been erected, no more than a half mile distant. Ray scanned it from the hogback, listening to that ominous distant sound, which seemed to increase in volume. She did not attempt to deceive herself as to its meaning. A fight was going on, and Jim would be in the thick of it. And there was nothing she could do except to play the woman's part—and wait.

For half an hour, as it seemed to her, she waited there, looking toward the town. Surely someone would come riding out to tell her that Jim was safe, that all was well!

There came a more furious outburst of firing than any before. Ray could bear the suspense no longer. She was going to ride in. And she had set her foot in the stirrup when she saw dust rising on the other side of the pass.

Presently she was able to make out a motor car, apparently making toward the Border. But when it reached the pass it turned and came in her direction instead.

Flannery's car! No other man in town owned anything but a battered

Ford, or some other inexpensive make. Four men in the car, of course indistinguishable! But Jim was not likely to be one of them.

Suddenly deathly fear came over the girl. She had left her revolver in the house. She swung into the saddle and turned the horse's head back home. But in that brief moment she knew that one of the men was Flannery.

She galloped madly, hearing the car purring after her along the trail. She looked back and saw that it was approaching rapidly. Flannery was standing up in the seat beside the driver, waving his arms, and shouting. But the horse was splashing through the little stream. Here were the cottonwoods, here was the house. Ray leaped to the ground and ran inside. The revolver—on the kitchen shelf!

She snatched it up. She heard the car stop at the door with grinding brakes. She ran out of the kitchen. Flannery and Sheriff White were there, with two men in the car, looking around, grinning. Flannery leaped forward, and Ray pulled the trigger.

The bullet buried itself in the doorframe between the two men. Before Ray could fire again, Flannery had seized the weapon from her hand and flung it to the floor. He struck her with his clenched fist, knocking her back against the wall. He slapped her face with his open palm, he seized her in his arms and covered her cheeks and lips with kisses.

"I've got you now, you little wildcat!" he bellowed. "Jim Trevor's dead and all hell's ragin' in town. But I've got you!"

He strained her to him till the breath all but left her body. The man was mad, drunk and mad, a fiend, no longer human. What was that he had said? Jim dead?

Ray felt darkness beginning to encircle her. She struggled only feebly. Flannery lifted her in his arms and carried her out to the car.

"Make room behind thar!" he shouted to Big Jackson. "Git yore infernal carcass onto the runnin' board if you can't fit in."

Big Jackson squeezed himself into a corner of the rear seat, and Flannery slammed Ray down. Sheriff White got in on the other side of her, and Flannery leaped into the front.

"Drive like hell," he ordered the man acting as the chauffeur. "Once we're through the pass we'll be out of danger. Damn them, we'll come back, fellers! But I'm goin' to git this girl to the Bowl first."

Leaving the road where it began to wind across the range, Jim and Nat drove their horses straight toward the ranch house. Presently they could see Flannery's car emerge from the pass, and there was not the slightest doubt where it was going.

Jim leaned over his horse's shoulders and loosed his six-gun in its holster. The look in his eyes boded ill for Flannery if he caught him. But only by a miracle could they hope to overtake him before he was back through the pass.

Then he saw the figure standing beside the horse upon the hogback, saw that tiny figure leap into the saddle and flee as the car drew near, and a groan broke from his lips. He knew who that was, saw everything that was happening in the clear light that lay over the range.

He reined in. "They'll have to go back through the pass if they're aimin' to make the Border," he called to Nat, and started off at full gallop.

Every instant Nat, following him, and looking toward the ranch house, expected to see Flannery's car on its way back. It was Ray's struggle that delayed it. Would there be time to intercept it at the derricks? Each moment seemed of enormous value as the two men drove their horses toward their objective.

It was less than half a mile away when the car appeared through the cottonwoods. Now it was nip and tuck. Car and horses were racing diagonally toward the pass, and the horses were

the nearer, but the car was coming on with increasing velocity.

Jim could see Ray now, slumped down in the back of the car, and he went mad. He roweled his horse until the pinto's sides were streaked with blood; he stood up in the stirrups and yelled hoarsely with rage.

Ray heard him, she sat up, saw him, and a cry broke from her lips. Sheriff White thrust her down violently, with an oath. He drew his revolver and took aim. Ray struck up his arm, and the shot went wild. He struck her across the face.

"Hold this she-devil, damn yuh, Jackson!" he bawled, and took aim again. Flannery was shooting too, from his seat in front.

Jim, gun in hand, dared not fire. With the car racing toward him at fifty miles an hour over a rutted trail, it was impossible to avoid the danger of hitting Ray. He shot low at the tires instead, while galloping on, with the bullets hissing past his ears. Nat, though he had driven his horse to the utmost of its powers, was still fifty yards behind him.

Car and horse were only a few yards apart now, and the car was traveling like the wind. Once through the pass, Ray was lost, in Flannery's power. And Jim, emptying his gun at the revolving disks, spurred the pinto squarely in front of the oncoming machine.

It was hopeless madness; it meant certain death to the horse and himself, but the thought flashed through his mind that there might remain a chance of Nat's rescuing Ray.

But that sacrifice was not to be demanded of Jim. For as the pinto leaped into the road one of the front tires, struck by a bullet, blew out, and the car, swerving, just missed the pinto, leaped into the air, and overturned.

Jim leaped to the ground and ran forward. He saw Big Jackson, lying pinned beneath the wreckage, groaning. Flannery, White, the chauffeur, and the girl had been flung onto the grass, Ray some distance from the others. Ignoring them, Jim ran forward and picked her up in his arms.

She was unconscious, and bleeding from an ugly cut across her forehead, but she was breathing.

Jim looked desperately about him. They were in the very neck of the pass, with the oil derricks stretching away on either side of them. Under the ridge some hundred and fifty yards away was the row of dilapidated shacks built for the laborers. Behind these, Jim knew, there was a spring, which, in fact, accounted for their having been located there.

The pinto, blown by the gallop, was incapable of further action; he stood with head hanging and flanks heaving. Jim began staggering with Ray toward the nearest shack, while the horse followed him.

As he turned, a volley rang out from beside the wrecked car. Flannery and White, neither badly injured, were resolved to snatch victory out of defeat.

White was aiming at Nat, who had reined in beside the road. His first bullet struck his horse along the withers, and penetrated the spine. It reared and collapsed, throwing Nat to the ground.

Flannery, insane with rage, fired at Jim. He was ready to kill Ray rather than lose her. And his volley, likewise, struck Jim's horse, inflicting two glancing wounds along the flank.

The pinto, maddened with pain, started off with a bound, racing over the range. Jim, unwounded, grasped the unconscious girl more tightly trying to shield her with his body, and started off at a run, zigzagging toward the cabin.

He heard a cry behind him. Nat was down, shot through the shoulder. Sheriff White had drawn his heavy derringer and fired a slug that had shattered the upper arm and shoulder-blade.

But already the ridge loomed up. Jim set Ray down behind a rock, where she

was out of reach of bullets, and ran back, firing as he did so. Nat was on his feet again and staggering toward him, blood streaming down his side. As Jim began firing, Flannery and White ceased, and began working their way along the ground to the shelter of the wrecked car. This gave Nat time to catch up to Jim, who caught him by the unwounded arm, and helped him along.

They had gained the shelter of the rock before the next vicious volley came hurtling after them. Splinters flew from the rock's face, but left them unharmed.

The little spring trickled down through the boulders of the ridge, forming a little pool surrounded by rocks on three sides, with a steep trail on the fourth, running down to the range. Leaving Ray, who was still unconscious, Jim fired a volley to discourage White and Flannery, then ran to the spring and filled his hat.

He returned and began stripping away the shirt from Nat's shoulder. He bathed the wound and bound it with a strip of the material, while the volleys from below scarred the face of the rock.

In a few minutes he had made Nat as comfortable as he could. Ray was coming back to consciousness. Jim looked over the rim and saw White and Flannery still crouched under the wreck.

"Let 'em stay there," he said. "They'll have all Alto Verde on their trail by and by."

And even as he spoke a body of horsemen came galloping toward the pass. Jim stood up, shouted, and waved his hat. He saw White and Flannery running, with hands uplifted.

Then suddenly it was White and Flannery who were shouting and waving hats. And then Jim knew. The newcomers, some twelve or fifteen in number, were a party of Flannery's gunmen, who had been with the cattle in the Bowl.

And, all hope being gone, he recharged his revolver, lay down behind the rim, and grimly waited.

CHAPTER XIII

Tom Gets Even

"I NEVER wanted to go wrong, Pop, but Sheriff White was always jumping me, and after Dad died I was up against it. That's how it came about that I got mixed up with that crowd," explained Lew Tunnery.

Tom Knowles scratched his head in perplexity. "I reckon Jim Trevor was kinder severe on you, Lew," he said. "But I gotta keep you here till the time's up."

"Of course I understand that," answered Lew Tunnery. "But I didn't want you to think me quite so bad as you seemed to."

It was the night before the stockholders' meeting. Lew Tunnery had been in old Tom's charge for six days, and he had used every minute of that time to make a good impression on the old man. In that effort, he had been singularly successful. Tom Knowles, in his lucid periods, was a guileless old man, willing to believe the best of everybody.

Lew had quickly extricated from his captor a complete statement as to what was projected. And, believing that Flannery was bound to win, he had determined if possible to win his lasting gratitude.

The message he had taken to the Bowl, when Jim caught him there was to the effect that the rustling gang was to hole up there until after the stockholders' meeting. If Lew could get word to them of what was being planned, and bring them on the scene, he believed his fortune would be made.

He had already persuaded old Tom to leave him free, except at night, and in place of a vigorous young man Tom believed that he had a sickly youth to deal with.

"Well, to-morrer you'll be free," said Tom, "and you'll have yore chanct to begin a new life. You run straight in future, young feller, and it won't be held agin you that you was wild in the days of yore indiscretion."

Lew snickered behind his hand. He let old Tom fasten his ropes for the night. The process consisted merely of tying Lew's ankles together so that he could not do more than hobble, and the knot of the rope was round the beam that formed the side of Tom's bed, on the other side of the shack. Thus it was impossible for Lew to untie the rope without going across and waking his guardian.

Lew snickered again as he lay in his bunk. It had been so easy to conceal that knife he had taken from the shelf. He waited for Tom to fall asleep.

But it was a long time before Tom slept, and when he did sleep he muttered and tossed so that Lew was afraid to begin work for fear of waking him. At last he grasped the slack of the rope in one hand, while with the other he began to saw at the rope's fibers.

The job was much harder than he had anticipated. The rope was tarred, and the edge of the knife, blunted by use, made little impression. And again and again, as Tom tossed and muttered, Lew was forced to desist.

It was early morning before he had the rope severed. Quickly he unfastened it and freed his feet. He rose up softly. He was almost at the door when Tom Knowles sat upright in his bed.

"Who's thar?" he called. "Lem! How in thunder—say, whar you goin'? How did you git free?"

Lew swung about as the old man scrambled out of bed, still only half-suspicious. His hand struck against a log of firewood outside the door. He picked it up and brought it crashing down on Tom's head. Tom groaned once and lay still.

Outside, the burro and the horse were standing, picketed side by side. Lew unfastened the horse, put on saddle and bridle, and was quickly on his way toward the Bowl, chuckling as he thought of that blow in the dark.

He had not the least conscience about his murderous deed. He was not even interested in knowing whether old Tom was alive or dead. He was thinking what a brave figure he would cut riding in with the gang to Flannery's rescue —a little behind the front, in case of danger.

Old Tom lay still for about ten minutes. Then he began slowly to revive. His face twitched, he sat up, he looked about him vacantly.

The blow, which had injured the brain, had swept out of his mind all but the dominant idea. Softly he got upon his feet, a senile grin upon his face. He crept out of the hut and began slinking through the mesquite.

At daylight he crept, gibbering, into the pass, and began moving to and fro among the derricks. Presently the sound of an approaching horse alarmed him. He crept into one of the huts and lay down. After a while he lost consciousness.

JIM crouched behind the rim, while the bullets hooted overhead. Beside him Nat, half conscious, was still grasping his revolver, and behind him lay Ray, fully conscious now, and drawing what little comfort she could find from her proximity to her lover.

Four of the gang lay dead upon the slope beneath, but Jim was bleeding from a gash across the forehead, and his ammunition was all but gone.

He had withstood three rushes, each of which had come nearer, and the fourth would be the last. Beneath, out of range of Jim's weapon, Flannery sat near one of the derricks, cursing the efforts of his men, and sneering at them for cowards as they failed to close in.

And such was Flannery's hold over them that none of them had disputed his statement that his leg had been injured in the car wreck.

"Go in and git him!" he bawled. "What you afraid of? Bring him down alive, fellers, and we'll have some fun with him before he croaks."

And he shouted filthy abuse at Jim, above. His hopes of getting Ray alive

had dwindled almost to zero, but stronger than his desire for the girl was his hate of the man who had thwarted him.

"How about Sheriff White?" sneered the leader of the gang.

"Sheriff White? Hell, he done his part in town, didn't he? You ain't kids, wantin' the sheriff always to be leadin' you. Go in and git him!"

Thus adjured, the gang drew together, consulting ways and means.

"And you, Lew Tunnery, I seen you skulking thar," shouted Flannery. "You're goin' to lead the crowd, Lew, seein' how you brung them here."

Shouts of laughter arose at this. "Whar's Lew? Here, Lew, we'll foller yuh, Lew," they bawled. "Put Lew in front, fellers."

Struggling and protesting, Lew Tunnery was dragged forward. Fifty feet from the nearest derrick, and immediately beneath the rim, behind which Jim waited, the gang lined up for their last assault.

Suddenly a figure was seen to dart from one of the huts. It was an aged man, in tatters, gibbering as he ran, and waving his hands.

"Hey, who's that feller?" shouted Flannery. "By heck, it's Tom Knowles. Git him, fellers, and we'll see whar he comes from."

But Tom Knowles was too quick for them. Eluding them, he darted to the derrick, and stood there, shaking his fists and screaming horrible threats.

"You got my savings, Flannery, and I'm goin' to git even with you!" he bawled. "You spawn of hell, you dirty rat!"

"Git him, the old fool!" yelled Flannery.

There came a rush toward the derrick. Old Tom turned, took something from his pocket, and dropped it down the shaft.

Followed a roar as if the earth had been rent asunder. The ground shook, and from the depths of the well a fiery geyser leaped, showering the gang with its oily spray.

High above the rim of the rock, in a great fountain, rose the geyser, and as the roar of the released reservoir subsided there rang out the hideous screams of the gang as they tried to tear off their blazing clothes.

Some, meeting a more merciful end than others, were blown to pieces as the cartridges in their belts exploded. Others raced madly to and fro, blazing human torches, till their yells grew fainter, and they dropped dead upon the range. Among these was Flannery.

Saturated by the blazing oil, which still continued to descend in drops of incandescent rain, he ran bawling among the shrieking crew until his cries ceased in death.

Only one man among them remained comparatively uninjured, and that was Sheriff White. Seated a little distance away from the crowd, he managed to dodge back when the fiery shower began to fall.

Only a few drops touched his clothes, which began to smolder, and, remembering the spring above, and momentarily almost forgetful of Jim in his panic, he began scrambling up the slope.

There he met Jim, gun in hand. Horror-stricken by the appalling scene, Jim was at first disposed to let him pass.

Then, recognizing him, he remembered.

"Go put out that fire, White, and take a drink, and then come back," said Jim. "I'll be waitin' for you."

"For Gawd's sake, Jim Trevor, you ain't goin' to go on fightin' now?" whimpered White. "They're dead, all of 'em, lemme pass—"

"I'm thinkin' of my dad," said Jim. "Yeah, Lew Tunnery wrote it all down. Go to the spring, and then—come back. I'll be here waitin'."

White read his fate in Jim's eyes, and with a hoarse cry clapped hand to holster. But his hand never reached the gun.

Shot through the heart, White fell,

his lifeless body rolling down the slope into the charred ruin below.

BUT those were only evil memories of a past which, if it could never be wiped out altogether, could be just laid aside, as such things have to be. And one did not feel the burden of them, looking out over the green range, where the cattle pastured.

With the downfall of the gang, things had prospered in the valley. The gusher had been capped, and if there was an ugly oil field extending all through the pass, at least it had brought prosperity to Alto Verde. And on the other side was the range, and the mesquite, and the untamed lands extending into the distance to the far-off Guadalupes.

"Happy, sweetheart?" asked Jim, as he rode with Ray through the lush grass, while the mild Herefords raised their heads to watch them, and then went on grazing.

"Happier every day," said Ray. "It's wonderful to think we should have come together like this, after all your travels, and all the—other things. I think it must have been destiny."

"To think that you were waiting for me all those years I was away, and I didn't know it," said Jim.

Ray smiled and leaned toward him. Their horses, wise to human ways, continued to walk sedately forward, side by side.

"We must turn back," said Ray, with a happy sigh. "Don't forget you've got to meet Nat on the stage at eight tomorrow morning."

They turned their horses back toward the ranch house in the soft light of evening.

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A Bridegroom with Prospects

By Monty Castle

Everybody knew that the play-acting at Buffalo Gap was going to be a riot of fun, but not the riot it turned out to be.

"NO, that won't do at all! You'll have to put more feeling into your love-making, Mr. Newlin. Don't take hold of Miss Shane's hand as though you thought it was a tear-bomb, ready to go off. *Pretend* you love her, anyhow!"

The exasperated voice of Miss Tewksberry rose above the delighted snorts of the McGonigle children who sat in the semidarkness at the rear of the schoolroom. For, of course, they knew, and she knew, and all of Buffalo Gap knew that Jack Newlin could scarcely drag his gaze away from Patricia Shane.

Ever since he had come to work on the West Fork Cattle Company's big ranch a month before, Jack had been following in the wake of those dancing blue eyes and that fly-away copper hair and that kissable red mouth. And now the very intensity of his feeling made him awkward and wooden on the stage. He fumbled with his walrus-like mustache and succeeded in completely dislocating the right half.

It was the last dress rehearsal of "Darkness Before Dawn, or The Trials of True Love." And, without doubt, it had been the worst performance ever given in the State of Colorado. Miss Tewksberry, the teacher, had not failed to tell them so.

"Miss Shane—" Pat started guiltily and tore her eyes away from Jack's. "Don't be so stiff! Mr. Newlin doesn't have the hoof and mouth. All you need to do is just be *natural!*"

Pat flushed and shrank back into the depths of her coal-scuttle bonnet. There were more snorts from the McGonigles, with an angry bass undertone from old Terry McRoberts, Pat's grandfather. Throughout that whole evening, whenever there had been a break in the rehearsal, he had watched that fresh young whippersnapper, Jack Newlin, lallygaggin' around with his granddaughter, until now his wrath had reached the boiling point.

"And please, *please*, Mr. Cobb, try to remember that you are no longer a respectable ranch manager, but a

wicked villain with nefarious designs on this innocent maiden here!"

Miss Tewksberry pointed toward the very red-cheeked Pat. "You want her for your own! You are trying to put the hero out of the way and foil his plans to marry her. Why, anybody'd think, to hear you, that you were reading a tax statement aloud!"

The perspiring red face of Chet Cobb who, as manager of the West Fork Cattle Company's ranch, was Jack Newlin's boss, grew redder and more perspiring. He fingered his luxuriant false sideburns unhappily.

"That will be all for to-night! If it doesn't go better than this to-morrow, the audience will ask for its money back, and we'll never, never be able to get that phonograph for the schoolhouse!" wailed Miss Tewksberry.

Apologetically the cast began gathering up their belongings. Old Terry McRoberts managed to catch hold of his granddaughter's arm in the confusion.

"I come by for you to see you got home all right, Pat," he explained, "but Chet Cobb, he asks can he drive you back, so I sez, yes. He's got somethin' important to say to you, girl, and I want you should give heed to him. Do you hear?"

Pat planted a kiss on her grandfather's ear and darted away.

"Answer me!" he yelled.

"Yes, Grandfather darling!"

"Yes—you'll give heed?"

"Yes, I hear you!"

The girl was gone! Old Terry swore helplessly as he rubbed his ear. When Chet Cobb appeared Terry was industriously hunting for his granddaughter. Why, that young maverick musta gone home without him! Sure Chet was welcome to come back to the Half-Circle and wait for her if he wanted to. Though, mebbe he'd druther ride over in the morning, say?

But Chet preferred to accompany him then and there. While they sat and waited, old Terry broached once more the subject closest to his heart—the purchase of his ranch by the West Fork Cattle Company. But after an hour or two of Chet's absent-minded replies, the old man began to realize that the deciding factor in this deal was going to be that rapscallion granddaughter of his. When midnight struck, and still no Pat, Chet muttered a sullen good night and departed.

At a scandalous hour, according to her grandfather, Pat arrived. Arrived with soft lips very red and coppery hair very mussed, and wide, blue eyes very luminous. She tiptoed into the house. Old Terry was waiting for her.

"You're a spalpeen! Where you been? Who's you with? I got a good notion to turn you over my knee and larrup you!" Like a fiery little bantam rooster, the old man glared up at his tall young granddaughter.

"Jest like yer mother afore you, and I ain't goin' to have it! Traipsin' around with that good-for-nothin' young roustabout from the West Fork. And him earnin' the munificent salary of forty a month and cakes! All he owns is his horse, and he can't set that none to good. I won't have it, I tell you, I won't have it!"

The light died out of Pat's eyes. Her mouth hardened.

"Let's talk it over at breakfast, Granddad. We'll both be cooler then," she suggested soothingly.

"No, we won't! We'll argy the thing out right here and now. You set down and listen!" Meekly the girl obeyed.

"What was that young upstart a-sayin' to you all this time? Out with it!"

"Oh, the loveliest things, Granddad!" twinkled Pat. "He kept talking about our ranch and the water rights to the gulch and why Chet Cobb wants to buy our place for his company—"

The old man bristled.

"He would be! If you wasn't so deaf, dumb, and blind—but mostly dumb—you'd see with one eye that this scalawag is aimin' to feather his own nest by marryin' him a girl whose grand-

father is about ready to shuffle off, leavin' her pretty well fixed!"

"Granddad! You know you'll live to be a hundred. Just a twinge of lumbago now and then—"

"A twinge! Mother of Moses! When the pain cuts me like knives every time I put on my boots! And then Chet comes out with this gen'rous offer to buy the ranch and water rights for his company. Supposin', I don't doubt, that you'll be treatin' him decent! So now we could move to town and have a neat little house with lights that you turn on with a twist of the wrist, and me tendin' a little garden and goin' down to the post office twice a day and meetin' a few cronies in the back of the store—"

Old Terry's voice died away as the blissful possibilities of life in Buffalo Gap overwhelmed him.

There was a lump in Pat's throat. She did want him to be happy. He'd been so good to her—so good!

"I don't see why I have to be always soft-soaping around Chet Cobb, Granddad! It's a good buy for the West Fork, no matter how you look at it. The water in our gulch is no use to us, but if it was dammed up, it could irrigate a couple of hundred acres for them!"

"Well, you better be blarneying Chet up a mite! While we're settin' here till such unholy hours waitin' for you, Chet begins talkin' about how he *could* buy the Slash X, and dam up their creek. He ain't goin' to have much more patience with your moonin' around with one of his hands. And neither am I! Throwin' yerself away like yer mother afore you!"

The old man's face grew oddly grim as he looked back over twenty years.

"I mind me the time," he went on, "when that slick, black-eyed Tim Shane come ridin' into this country. He had a smile and a word for every maid within twenty mile. Not much for work, Tim wasn't, but how he could make a banjo whine, with him singin' languishin'-like and rollin' his eyes! Yer mother was plumb out of her head over him.

"And then—after they'd run away and got married, and Tim had drifted about from one bad job to a worse—he jest lit out. Lit out fer good! And my poor little lamb come home to stay, and you was born, and she jest natchelly died of a broken heart!"

The old man blew his nose, and Pat blinked very fast as she slipped her hand into his gnarled paw.

"You've been everything to me, Granddad!" she whispered brokenly. "But Jack is so—so—"

"Uh-huh. Jest like yer father, I tell you! So—so—! That's Tim Shane all over again! And I ain't goin' to have my granddaughter wreckin' her life before my very eyes whilst there's a good steady man like Chet Cobb that wants to marry her. No, sirree! My grandson-in-law's a-goin' to be a good reeliable feller with prospects!" A new thought seemed to strike him. He whirled suspiciously. "This young varmint ain't gone and made you promise nothin', has he?"

Pat's eyes dropped. Color flooded her face.

"The wolf-whelp! Why, he ain't seen you but half a dozen times! I'll teach him to come sneakin' around my granddaughter!" He leaped up and strode back and forth, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I'll find a way to put a stop to it. I'll find a way! Now go to bed, ye little rapscallion, and leave me to cogitate!"

Pat eyed her grandfather apprehensively. She knew how he adored her, and she had usually been able to twine him around her smallest pink finger, except upon those rare occasions when he had sent her off so that he might "cogitate." After those times he had always had his own way.

Wearily she mounted the stairs and went to bed. If she could just make him see Jack as he was! If she could only convince him that those laughing gray eyes meant friendliness and not daredeviltry; that Jack's wide, easy

grin was caused by good humor rather than flirtatiousness; and that his swift stride, with its suggestion of a swagger that she so adored, was merely the sign of health instead of conceit. But there was no changing old Terry's mind when once it was made up.

The last thing she heard as she dropped off to sleep was the thump—thump—thump of her grandfather's hobnailed boots while the old man trudged back and forth, "cogitatin'."

At breakfast the next morning he kept his eyes on his plate. But afterwards, he complained loudly about Pat's always hiding his Sunday hat. When she silently pointed to it on its usual hook, he grabbed it and stalked with great dignity out to his buckboard.

Pat watched him drive off toward town. All that day, as she pressed and repressed her costume for the play that night, as she tried a hundred different poses before her mirror in the old-fashioned gown, a growing worry tugged at her heart. Surely, in this enlightened age, nobody could force a girl into doing anything she didn't want to. Certainly not! But still—The shadows were lengthening across the valley before her grandfather returned.

On their way to the schoolhouse that night old Terry kept clearing his throat and casting uneasy little side-glances in Pat's direction.

"You really want to see yer old grandfather settled nice and comfortable-like in town, don't you, lass?" he began plaintively.

"Of course, Granddad!"

"And you believe I'm only thinkin' of what's best in wantin' a good husband for you—with prospects? You ain't never doubted how I love you—and you'll be doin' what I asks, won't you?"

Pat's eyes grew misty as she saw the anxious, loving gaze bent upon her. She longed to fling her arms around her grandfather's neck and burrow against his shoulder. And then she remembered. Chet—and Jack! Her eyes hardened. She continued to gaze straight ahead.

When she failed to answer, old Terry leaned forward and lashed his horses grimly.

The school yard was already jammed with vehicles. The back room, behind the tottery plank stage, was a bedlam of confusion. Grease-paint, mustaches, hoops, wigs. Miss Tewksberry was close to a collapse.

"Don't forget to throw your voices toward the back of the room! Careful how you sit in those hoops, Miss Shane—remember what happened last time!" Pat reddened. "Don't forget, Mr. Cobb, that you *hate* this small town hero, here—" She pointed to Jack. "And you, Mr. Newlin, a little more ardor, please. Now all ready! Curtain!"

The dark green curtains were bumpily pushed apart along the wire, exposing the aged parents of Esmeralda, conversing under an arbor of poisonously pink roses. The play was on!

"Can I take you home?" whispered Jack anxiously to Pat as they stood in the shadow of the green curtain awaiting their cues.

"I daren't let you, Jack. Granddad was furious about last night. He's set on my being, well, nice to Chet Cobb. He's up to something. I wish I knew what!"

They were standing very close. Jack's eyes searched the sweet, upturned face, framed in its ringlets and poke-bonnet, and his hand found hers in the folds of her voluminous skirt. A flush spread across Pat's cheek, followed by a proud little lift of her head. What if he *hadn't* much of a job? What if he *wasn't* middle-aged and settled? What if he *didn't* have any prospects? He was the one man in the whole world for her!

"Esmeralda!" prompted Miss Tewksberry.

Pat jumped and drifted forward onto the stage. The play swept on. The quavering-voiced parents of Esmeralda

were completely taken in by the wiles of Chauncey DeWitt, the city slicker, played by Chet Cobb. But poor little Esmeralda continued to eye him like a rabbit facing a snake.

With immense gusto the audience cheered the damsel and hissed the villain.

Inevitably the parents consented that the fair Esmeralda should be the bride of Chauncey DeWitt. Poor Jonathan Baxter (Jack) was left to gnaw his nails in defeat. For the affluent Chauncey had promised to lift the mortgage on the old homestead on the day that the girl became his wife.

The worthy Jonathan pleaded with Esmeralda's parents, but received only black looks for his pains, while the villainous Chauncey heaped abuse upon our hero's noble head. Only Esmeralda, like a lamb led to sacrifice, looked longingly back at Jonathan.

There was a breathless moment when Jonathan caught Esmeralda in his arms and implored her not to throw away her pure young beauty on this oily-tongued rep-tyle from the wicked city. The audience nearly slid off their seats in ecstasy. This was acting!

Miss Tewksberry grew rapturous as she saw the erstwhile tepid Jonathan crush Esmeralda madly to him; and when the hitherto wooden Chet rushed forward, jerked the girl away and swung a vicious blow at our hero, she almost clapped for joy. The schoolhouse rocked with cat-calls and cheers.

It is the hour of the wedding. The minister—in private life the local justice of the peace—is ready. Esmeralda reluctantly appears. The villain awaits her, looking exceedingly villainous. The minister begins. The trap is slowly closing—

A horrified gasp went up from the audience. Wild-eyed with triumph, Miss Tewksberry watched. In a moment the ceremony will be over, and just as the despairing Esmeralda is ready to swoon at her husband's feet, in will rush our hero and the sheriff.

While Jonathan thrusts the deed to the homestead into the old folks' hands, the sheriff will be arresting the snarling-faced Chauncey on charges of arson, mayhem, and bigamy. But chiefly for bigamy.

Thus the marriage is proved a mockery, and the swooning Esmeralda will be free. The elopement of the true lovers will follow, with the sound of galloping hoofbeats in the distance.

Miss Tewksberry came back to the present with a start. The villain has made his responses; now the minister turns to Esmeralda. But before she can say, "I do," the door bursts open and in rush the hero and sheriff.

Miss Tewksberry wept with rage. It is too soon! Why, the ceremony isn't even finished yet. Idiots! Bunglers! Helpless and fuming, she watched the demoralized cast try to pick up their cues. Saw Jonathan hand over the deed to the parents, watched him deliver a brutal uppercut—certainly not in the script—to the villain, which stretched him flat.

Then, amid delirious cheers from the audience, Jonathan picked up the girl in his arms and dashed through the door. There followed the realistic sounds of galloping hoofbeats in the distance. How very realistic they were!

Pandemonium reigned in the schoolhouse. The howlingly satisfied audience clapped, stamped, whistled, and pounded. The green curtains drew back displaying the villain and the aged parents taking their bows. There were insistent calls for the hero and heroine. But only the old parents and the foiled villain dazedly responded. At last the curtains closed with an air of finality.

Old Terry watched for a moment in bewilderment. Then he leaped from his seat and hurled himself through the mob. Heedless of his lumbago and seventy years, he vaulted up on to the platform and through the curtains. After a single word to Chet Cobb, who stared at him in speechless horror, the pair dashed through the door and to-

ward old Terry's buckboard outside.

Far ahead of them thrummed the steady hoofbeats of a pair of horses. Across the valley, past quiet ranches, straight up into the mountains raced Chet and old Terry after the runaways on horseback.

PAT leaned from her saddle and called anxiously:

"You're sure, Jack, that you saw it?"

"Dead certain, honey! Musta been in the pocket of Chet's coat, and when he hung it over a chair, it fell out. A license for Chester Cobb to marry Patricia Shane!"

"Then, if I'd said another word I'd have been *married* to Chet?" she gasped.

"Absolutely! I s'pose you could make people believe you thought it was a fake. But it 'ud be one helluva mess to get out of. Do you wonder I nearly busted up the show? Grabbed you and beat it for all I was worth! Pretty slick—the minister being a justice in real life and a crony of Chet's besides!"

"Well, you can bet it was Granddad's idea! He spent all last night 'cogitatin',' you know. I've been expecting something, with him looking like a dog that's been chasing sheep ever since he got back from town to-day. But I never dreamed—"

"If we can only make Custer Creek before the storm hits us, we'll be all right. There's a J. P. right on the main street, I hear. But that's a mean-looking sky!"

Jack squinted ahead, while Pat continued to look back. She knew that her grandfather could not be far behind. His team was a good one. But the road was steep. Perhaps they could beat him!

Distant grumbling thunder crept closer. The narrow canyon reverberated; the air grew oppressively heavy. Then the storm burst upon them in all its violence.

Blindly, doggedly, they urged their horses through the downpour. Brief flashes of lightning illuminated the winding road. Suddenly a jagged light rent the darkness. There was a crash, and a pine tree on the slope above splintered and flamed like a red gash in the night.

Pat's horse lunged, lost his footing, and almost unseated her. She managed to keep him on the trail, but a moment later she called to Jack.

"Oh, I'm afraid he's gone lame! He's limping terribly. What will we do?"

"Have to let him go, I guess. My horse can carry double. We'll make better time."

In a few seconds Pat had made the change. The rain grew icy, turned to sleet. Gamely the girl clenched her teeth together, but she could not control the shuddering chills that swept through her drenched, muslin-clad body.

"Right here's where we quit!" announced Jack with tender sternness. "There's a hotel in Placer Gulch. Another mile of this and you'll have pneumonia!"

Already they were rounding a bend, and a feeble light glimmered through the storm.

"Hennessy who runs the hotel and Granddad are friends. He'll send word, or even try to hold us here!"

"He better not!"—grimly— "If I have to hogtie him and every other living soul in Placer Gulch!"

"Oh, Jack! We've forgotten our costumes!" cried Pat with a wavering giggle.

"That's the girl! Pull your bonnet down over your face and be my dear old mother that I'm trying to take to Custer Creek for the rodeo!"

The sleepy Hennessy, clad in a nightshirt and a pair of trousers, hastily donned in deference to the lady, peered at them through half-shut eyes as he held the lamp above his head.

"The poor woman!" he murmured with a glance at the bowed little figure in bedraggled bonnet and shawl. "So yer rig bust down, and you got to have a place to sleep? Here's number seven and number four vacant. All I got,

too, on account of the rodeo. G'night to you both!" He handed them two keys from the rack and shuffled back to his warm bed.

With suppressed giggles the pair tiptoed down the hall to their rooms. Had Hennessy waited, he might have been surprised at the depth of the young man's filial devotion as he kissed his old mother good night outside her door. Reluctantly he left her. They must be up and on their way by dawn, but first they'd have to get some rest. Eloping had proved to be surprisingly strenuous!

A half hour later a clangor in the lobby aroused Hennessy again. He stumbled grumpily forth to meet a second weary and bedraggled pair—Chet Cobb, soaked but dogged, and old Terry, looking more than ever like a half-drowned bantam rooster.

No, said Hennessy, he hadn't seen no eloping couple nowheres. A bunch of waddies on their way to the rodeo. A guy and his old mother. The banker from Little Cub Gulch. The house was full up, in fact.

"Elopin' or no elopin', we got to get out of this storm and ketch us a few winks. I'm dead on me feet!" groaned old Terry, clutching his back.

Hennessy pondered.

"Tell you what: seein's you're a friend of mine, Terry, I guess I can double you up with another guy, if you'll slip in quiet-like. Yer partner's welcome to the sofy." He pointed to the sway-backed couch behind the stove. Both newcomers accepted gratefully.

IT was dawn. Jack Newlin opened his eyes and blinked. Where was he, anyhow? He stared around the meager little room, at the distempered walls, and at the golden oak dresser. Then a flush and a grin spread across his tanned face. Of course! Why, he was on his way to be married! To the sweetest, the prettiest, the— Aw, what was the use! You'd said it all when you said Pat Shane.

A long, rasping snore made him stiffen. Gingerly he screwed his head around—and clutched at the bedclothes convulsively. There, on the pillow not twelve inches away, lay a face. A face from whose open mouth issued long rhythmic snores that gently fluttered a white fringe of Santa Claus whiskers to and fro.

A red-flannelled arm seemed to be reaching toward Jack's ear. Pat's grandfather! A chill ran down Jack's spine. Pat's grandfather, and they'd been holed up together all night like a couple of prairie dogs!

That sneaking Hennessy! Of all the gall—to chuck a perfect stranger into bed with him. A stranger? Cold sweat beaded his forehead. If only it *were* a stranger! Could he ever get out of this place? The game was up when old Terry once opened his eyes. A fat chance they'd have of getting a license anywhere in Colorado with *him* dogging their footsteps!

Experimentally he edged a toe out from under the covers. Then his whole leg. As he shifted his weight, the springs creaked like a pack-rat in a trap.

He grew rigid, holding that one leg extended until a violent cramp spread up to his knee, and he began to tremble. But the snores continued. At last he dared to lower the foot to the floor. He paused before he began to worm the other leg out.

With painful caution he crawled from under the covers, stood upright, and took a step forward. In the dim light he set his foot down on something cold and yielding and wet and slimy. He lifted his foot wildly, stumbled backwards, and sat on the floor with terrific suddenness. Old Terry's water-logged boot hit the other wall.

Holy catnip! The whole building must have rocked. Numb with horror, he waited the worst. A little bird chirped blithely on the window-sill. There was an ominous silence.

R-r-r-r-rumph! No music in all the world was ever sweeter to human ears

than was that vigorous snore of old Terry's. Jack crept forward on all fours toward his clothes. Cautiously he drew on each garment until at last he was dressed. He tiptoed to the door and, with one eye on Terry, turned the knob. The old man stirred. Jack waited. After an eternity the sleeper settled back into his pillow again.

If only the pesky door wouldn't creak now! Jack opened it an inch. He braced himself with one hand on the chair-back over which hung the old man's clothes. Then he lowered his foot to the sill. Creak—creak! A board groaned loudly under his weight. Old Terry sat bolt upright and blinked. With a wild banshee yell he recognized Jack. The latter cast an agonized glance over his shoulder, grabbed the garment under his hand, and fled.

Pat was already waiting in the doorway of her room. Jack clutched her arm, and the two of them raced along the hall ahead of a leaping figure in red flannels.

Like a streak they were down the stairs and across the lobby. Out in the yard they gave a fleeting glance at the various vehicles under the sheds and chose the only one to which the horses were still hooked—old Terry's buckboard and his fast-trotting bays.

On two wheels they careened out of the yard and up the single steep street of Placer Gulch.

"Oh, Jack, you know Grandfather! He'll be after us in half a minute!"

"Nope, not in half a minute!" chuckled Jack. "Not till he finds himself another pair of pants!" Like a victorious flag, he waved the old man's trousers in the air.

Pat giggled.

"He's so mad I don't think he'd mind riding on a band-wagon in his red flannels!"

Which wasn't far from the truth. Not ten minutes later old Terry, garbed in a pair of Hennessy's trousers which overlapped twelve inches around his middle and dragged on the ground, was furiously whipping a team up the canyon road. Beside him sat Chet Cobb, still grim and still persistent.

On the winding hairpin road Jack looked back and saw Pat's grandfather far below. Thanks to the old man's fondness for good horses, the team Jack drove was much the better of the two. But Terry could drive anything that moved.

A half hour later, after much coaxing, swearing, and lashing, Jack urged his lathered team around a bend and into the main street of Custer Creek.

"There's his sign," pointed out Pat breathlessly.

Henry Tandy, the justice of the peace, was at that moment crossing his back yard carrying a frothing pail of milk in one hand. The couple hailed him desperately.

Pat he recognized with a stiff little nod. For a long time he and old Terry had wrangled over politics. At present Henry Tandy was feeling both injured and outraged because Terry's candidate had received a landslide at the recent county elections.

"You'll have to wait till nine o'clock when the courthouse opens if you ain't got no license!" he announced truculently.

"But Grandfather will be here any minute now—" moaned Pat.

"Well, I guess he can wait till nine fer your weddin', can't he?"

"But that's just it, Mr. Tandy. He's trying to keep us from getting married!"

Tandy brightened.

"Agin it, is he?"

"Says I'm a worthless young limb o' Satan," interposed Jack. "And a good-for-nothing, dumb roustabout. He's bringing *his* idea of a groom along with him—"

"And there they come now!" tragically from Pat, who was pointing to a cloud of dust.

Tandy dropped the pail of milk and leaped up on the back of the buckboard.

"Git fer the courthouse!" he commanded.

They got. At the hitching-post they

dropped the reins and scampered after the panting justice. Unearthing the key from beneath the mat, he let them in. Then he relocked the door after them.

With a speed he had not exhibited in twenty years, Henry Tandy filled in the papers and handed a pen to the trembling couple. Already there was a mighty pounding and bellowing outside.

Then, just as the glass in the door burst with a crash and a wild-eyed pair crawled through, Henry Tandy raised his voice and shouted unctuously:

"I pronounce you man and wife!"

With that he wheeled and viewed the belligerent newcomers with elaborate surprise.

"Well, you're just in time to kiss the bride! We waited as long as we could, Terry, knowin' how anxious you was to attend this weddin'—but you dawdled along the road so, that finally we had to go ahead!"

"You gotch-eared bobcat! You son of a weasel! You—!" Old Terry choked on his wrath and grew inarticulate. He turned to his white-faced granddaughter and suddenly the fight seemed to go out of him. He looked tired and old. With a weary little gesture he half raised his arms, and Pat flew to their shelter. Tearfully she burrowed against his shoulder and mumbled broken, penitent, little phrases.

"No, it was me that was selfish, Pat—wantin' to fix things around to sell the Half-Circle so's I could go to town to live and all. But underneath, what I was really wantin', lass, was a good husband for you—with prospects!"

Surprisingly it was Chet who spoke up now.

"I got a confession to make!" began the defeated suitor with grim shamefacedness. "A letter come yesterday from the company sayin' that upon good advice they was goin' to buy your ranch. It was just what they wanted, so the matter was took out of my hands completely.

"But I was skunk enough not to say nothin', hopin' Miss Pat might think kindly of me if she figgered I was buyin' the ranch because of her!" He paused and mopped his brow. "I ain't proud of myself. And, Newlin, I got a heap better job for you, now you're a—a married man!" He couldn't seem to meet Pat's suddenly glowing eyes.

"Thanks," said Jack. "Shake!" The two shook hands.

And now it was Jack who flushed and grew uneasy as he drew a folded paper from his pocket. "*I* got a confession to make, too. You see, when this discussion came up at the West Fork Company headquarters about buying adjoining ranches with water rights, the president decided to send out somebody on the q. t. to look things over. So I—"

"Somebody! Who?" exploded Chet.

"His son. Me—to be exact. And so I turned in my report last week advising them to buy the Half-Circle at any price. This is the answer. As the new manager of the West Fork, I'll be—"

"You'll be firing Chet Cobb!" Chet reached for his hat. "Guess I'll be moving on!"

"No, you won't! I need a foreman, don't I? Think I'm going to lose a man that's got the grit to admit he's wrong?" shouted Jack over his shoulder.

Chet blinked and swallowed rapidly. Old Terry gulped.

The newly married pair were scampering down the steps.

"How about starting our honeymoon with a little breakfast, Mrs. Newlin?" inquired Jack of the blushing Pat as they turned the corner.

Back in the courthouse old Terry grinned across at the justice.

"Still a-tryin' to scatter sunshine along my path, ain't you, Henry?" he crowed with a wink, and a nudge that almost caved in Henry Tandy's rib. "Well, I'm certainly plumb obliged to you—helpin' me like you done to-day to get me a good, reliable grandson-in-law—with prospects!"

Luck of the Trail

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

Driftin' down the trail went Chris, a-singin' his cowboy doggerel, till he drifted into a sunset land of love where rose-red lips and close-circling arms beguiled him from his wanderer's way forever. And that, folks, is what is meant by the luck of the trail—the luck you're sure to have if you wander far enough.

OH, Bearcat Bill was a terrible pill!
When he rode a bronc
And got knocked off,
He said, "Pretty creature,
How you make me laugh!"

CHRIS JENNIFER sang lustily, as if he were so full of the sheer joy of living that his exuberance must find vocal expression. The chestnut mare he bestrode, although many miles of trail lay behind her, seemed to lift her feet in time with the rhythm of his song.

And why should he not ride the trail gayly? He was young, possessed of excellent health, and had the result of two years' saving in the money belt about his waist. He was entering new country with high hopes, at the call of an old-time friend with whom he would throw in his fortune.

Jennifer was not too tall and not too short; his muscular body was as supple as an eel's; in the sun his hair shone like burnished copper, while his eyes were of a brown so dark as to sometimes look black. His features were good enough for any man, while he met the world with a good-humored smile and a straightforward gaze which won far more friends than enemies.

Far ahead on the trail he spied a balloon of dust. This drew rapidly nearer at the heels of a pair of galloping ponies. Both were red roans, deep-chested and lithe-limbed animals, built for endurance and speed. He drew in to watch their approach with

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a true horse lover's keen appreciation.

The objective of the riders was evidently the lane to a ranch house which Jennifer had just passed, for they reined in before they came abreast of him. At a passing glance he judged they were brother and sister, the former some ten years the girl's senior. Of her he had an impression of tossing black braids, vivid blue eyes and bright red lips.

They nodded at Chris and he called out:

"Is this the right trail for Hexo?"

"Keep a-going—twenty miles," the man called back.

The girl briefly turned to gaze after the chestnut and its debonair rider. Just a shade of wistfulness tinged the blue eyes. Did she, perchance, wish that the stranger had ridden on less promptly?

For Jennifer maintained a good gait, seemingly oblivious of the fact that he had passed a very pretty girl.

"We're a-goin' tuh eat in that Hexo town," he told his mount cheerfully, "and sleep. To-morrow we'll push on till we hit Dave's place, and there, I reckon, we'll stay."

At sundown the chestnut mare halted before the shabby entrance to Hexo's one public place of entertainment. The interior was untidy, as also appeared the old woman who presided at the desk. But she gave Chris a three-toothed smile and a room, which latter was, she told him, the best in the house.

"Just the same," he confided to himself, with a disdainful glance from the cobweb-draped ceiling and corners to the sad-looking bed, "I reckon I'll be moving on after supper and camp on the range again."

If the old woman had been unprepossessing, the appearance of her son when he entered the dining room, was even more so; and his darting little eyes, nearly hidden between thick lids, indicated a slyly active mind.

Naturally gregarious, Jennifer welcomed the arrival of half a dozen reckless-mannered but jolly young fellows whose business activities were not hard to guess. Following supper, poker was a natural occupation pleasing to all hands.

Jennifer sat in at the game but played with surprising caution. He had no mind to dip into the contents of that belt snugged to his middle, for that was the stake to start him in the game he truly loved—horse breeding.

When flasks were produced Jennifer was not enthusiastic. "I mostly don't touch the stuff," he said. "I reckon you would call me a 'two-drink man!'"

"Well, take two drinks of *this*," advised one of his companions, "and you'll have something, for it's the real stuff."

It was strong, at any rate. After the second drink Chris felt gayly disregardful of anything but the pleasure of the moment. He accepted a third "sample." After that, memory yielded but a vague record of events.

The hilarious crew who provided this refreshment were not, after all, hard-hearted. As the poker game broke up one of them pointed to Chris, whose shining head lay pillowed on outflung arms as he sprawled over a table-top.

"That kid better stick tuh two drinks," was the sage remark. "I never did see anyone pass out so quick, and so com-plete. He needs a nurse!" There was a general laugh while the old woman's fat son, who now ruled the desk, came forward.

"The kid's booked for the night," he said. "Wantuh lend a hand tuh roll him upstairs and intuh bed?"

Thus merry-hearted Chris Jennifer, after a tilt with John Barleycorn, was retired to the oblivion of a long night. Yes, and nearly of a day, for the sun was well down its western path when the lids lifted heavily above the brown eyes, now dulled and expressionless.

Sharp pains stabbed his temples as he turned his head uneasily. It was minutes before he sensed his whereabouts.

"I always did know two drinks was my limit," he told himself ruefully. "Now I feel like something the cat dragged in."

He felt worse five minutes later when he discovered that the contents of the belt he wore underneath his clothing had vanished while he slept. He descended the stairs precipitately to find the old woman and her son wrangling over the cash register.

Chris Jennifer had the quick-flaring temper which matched his hair. It was not often kindled because of his debonair and friendly spirit. Now it flamed hotly.

"Say, you fat sonuvergun! What kind of a place are you runnin' where a fellow's cleaned of his pile while he sleeps?"

"Wha'd'yuh mean?"

"Some lousy thief stripped my money belt after I went tuh bed last night and I'm gonna—"

"No you're *not!*" the fat one snarled. The muzzle of a forty-five became visible above the desk-top. "You're a-goin' tuh keep your shirt on while you're in this ho-tel. You tanked up like a fish last night—then yuh played poker till them boys picked yuh clean—your whole wad. Yuh got sore and wound up with a roughhouse where you got your haid punched good. I don't wanta hear another peep out of a bird like *you!*"

Jennifer felt lively doubts of the truth of this narrative. Yet his swimming senses gave him no reliable aid. There *was* a sizable bump on his head. "But I wouldn't have believed it of muhself," he reflected drearily. "That I'd plumb go loco and fool away my whole stake thataway!"

A crumpled bill and a few coins were sole tenants of his pocket. "Enough tuh pay my score yere and buy grub till I hit Dave's place," he considered as he gulped down a black brew of coffee. This failed of the desired effect and Chris stretched out on a bench in the office until his swimming senses and wobbling knees should function in a more natural way. Stupor again claimed him.

Later he dreamed, and voices gradually wove into the dream. He did not recognize their reality.

"Need a rider bad, do yuh?" came the question. "Young feller drifted in yere, yesterday, that sure knows hawsses. Got full last night. If yuh can wake him up—"

Booted feet crossed the bare floor noisily; light flashed against Jennifer's closed lids. His shoulder was shaken with vigor while a nasal voice called: "Wake up, kid! Wake up! I got a job for yuh!"

Dizziness had worn off but not the headache. Neither could Chris think very clearly. However, he understood that the speaker—a lean man whose face was baked a dull brick color by the sun while his walrus mustache and thin fringe of hair were bleached by the same agency—was in instant and urgent need of a rider to help trail herd a bunch of saddle stock.

"Got to hit La Cascada by to-morrow evenin'," he explained. "It's a rush order and a buyer from Mexico expects them ponies to be there *on time.*"

"It won't take me much off my trail," Chris decided, "and it'll give me a few dollars tuh line my pocket."

Even in the darkness, for it was a moonless night, Jennifer recognized that he was working with good stock. The throbbing pain in his head and the forced haste of the drive blinded him to the strained manner of his fellow riders. He had accepted a job to help with certain horses over a given portion of trail. No question arose in his mind beyond that.

At break of day a halt was called for breakfast and a brief rest. Then, for the first time, Chris noted certain horses. "You've got some fine roans in this bunch," he told the leader, whose name he had learned was Jake Breen. "Star-M" he read the brand.

"Where've I seen that mark on a roan? M-mm—Oh!" Suddenly he remembered the pair of galloping ponies

he had met on the trail the previous day. He repeated the incident to Breen who was watching him through narrowed eyes.

"Yeppy," came the reply. "Them was Judith Mell and her brother Harvey. They own the Star-M. I'm foreman there. They've got some of the finest roan brood mares in the state, b'sides a roan stallion that's a prince. The ranch is noted for that stock."

Jennifer found his thoughts straying from the ponies to the sprightly appearing girl who held half ownership in them. How well she had ridden! What sparkling eyes she had had! It must be fine to have a sister like that to ride the trails with.

That day's ride banished all thoughts from the minds of the herders save that of the business in hand. Dust powdered the clothing of the riders, sifting under their neckerchiefs, filling their ears and clogging their nostrils; it blanketed the coats of the horses while their withers were stained with the perspiration which told of long hard travel.

At dusk they pounded into La Cascada. "Head 'em for Gerone's corral," Breen ordered. "De Soto'll be waitin' for us there."

De Soto was there, his sharp black eyes gleaming with satisfaction while he counted off the clean-limbed, sturdy animals filing into the corral.

"Si, si, señor!" he nodded at Breen. "All is as you said. My boys are waiting, and we go South to-night."

Chris Jennifer's healthy young stomach had begun to clamor for food. "I'll be a new man," he declared, "if I can just wrap myself about a beefsteak, or a mess of ham and fried 'taters. If you know a good location for eats, Freckles," he addressed one of the wranglers who had drawn his mount in near the chestnut mare, "just you lead on and I'll follow."

"We're all goin' over tuh Dorgan's," was the rather surly reply. "Jake's goin' tuh pay off there."

As they headed up the straggling street Chris felt, despite his weakness, some return of his usual spirits.

"Oh, Bearcat Bill was a terrible pill!" his high tenor informed all and sundry. "When he rode a bronc—"

"Hey! Yuh damned fresh kid! Yuh wanta tell all the town we're here?" the freckled rider broke in.

"Huh? Why not?" Jennifer demanded, laughing. "I ain't none ashamed of my presence."

Further argument was cut off by the appearance of Breen and the other wrangler. At Dorgan's they rode directly into the stable yard without dismounting. The light from a lantern dimly revealed an open-front shed and a low stable with a row of stalls.

In front of the latter a loose-limbed individual in brown overalls lounged on a bale of hay. An amazingly thin lad in shirt and trousers several sizes too small for him, was stretching to hang a bridle over a hook near the door.

As they dismounted the latter turned to peer sideways at the party. The lantern light focused on his face and upper body. There was something peculiar about his eyes, and he carried his left shoulder hunched up as if he were in continual expectation of a blow.

"Hey, Squinty! Get outa my sight!" Breen snarled, cuffing at the lad. "Every time I see that kid something goes wrong—he's a jinx! I dunno whatever for Dorgan wants tuh keep a cross-eyed feller hangin' around."

The boy shrank back into the shadows but Chris knew he was staring at the ponies. "Hey, Buddy!" he called. "Come here! Yuh look like you'd know how tuh take care of a real good saddle horse. Are you strong enough tuh give my mare a rub-down?"

"Y-you bet!" the lad stumbled forward eagerly. "Oh, th-thank you," he stammered as Chris tossed him a two-bit piece.

"Why!" the latter exclaimed. "You aren't cross-eyed."

"Nope," was the reply. "Buckshot

hit me in the eye when I was a little shaver. I ain't got no reg'lar folks," he added, "but Dorgan 'lows me tuh help around the stable for my keep."

To Jennifer's surprise he discovered that Breen and the other two riders were taking the trail again that night. "Dang it, Freckles," he teased the surly rider, "you'll be saddle-galled as bad's your cayuse."

"We'll camp on the trail."

"Well, I'll be ding-busted!" Chris exclaimed. "Those Mells must be hard babies tuh work for if they expect yuh to make a drive like that and hop outa town on the home trail without a night's rest."

"I wouldn't want Harve Mell tuh catch me stayin' in La Cascada over night!" The freckled wrangler guffawed, but Jennifer sensed something besides mirth in the sound.

Chris stowed away a double-ration supper, then immediately sought his bed. And so wearied was he that not even thoughts of his vanished savings postponed sleep.

He awakened in the lavender light of early dawn. His head was still sore but clear thought was returning.

"Funny bunch, those Star-M gazabes," he reflected as he lay staring at the window and luxuriously stretching. "That whole drive seems kinda funny, now I think of it. I reckon I musta been goofy all day yesterday. Nothin' seems right as I recomember, since I headed intuh Hexo t'other night."

Jennifer decided to make an early start as two long days of riding now lay between him and his proposed destination. "I reckon I'll slip down tuh the stable and see that the li'l' mare's all right, then I'll see if the cook'll give me a hand-out."

He found the lad Breen had dubbed "Squinty" asleep in the stall with his pony. "Hey, Buddy!" he called. "You want tuh hop to it and help me get started?"

When Chris was looking his mount over with some care, there came the sound of horses' hoofs drumming into town at a stiff gait. A guess would make it a half dozen or so riders. Some evidently turned toward the railroad yard and livery corral while the remainder headed for the hotel.

"I'll hafta see what they want," the boy explained. He darted around the corner of the building, where he remained several minutes.

Jennifer, seeing that the mare was contentedly breaking her fast, decided to forage for his own meal. He was emerging from the stable when a small figure catapulted against him with violence. Both went to the ground.

"Quick!" the boy gasped. "Slap on your saddle and hit the trail. *They're after you!*"

"What? Who?" Jennifer questioned with amazement, as he slowly rose.

"The Star-M boys. Oh! Do be quick!" came the half-tearful plea. The boy had scrambled hastily to his feet and was already swinging the saddle to the mare's back. "Mell's awful mad—they're going tuh string you up!"

"For the Lord's sake, *why!*" demanded Jennifer, though a terrible suspicion was even then suggesting a reason.

"Don't bother trying tuh play innocent tuh me; I don't care what you done!" the young voice shrilled and broke. "It's the third time this year hawsses have been stole from the Star-M. Harvey swore he'd hang the first hawss thief he caught."

"Buddy, I'm no hawss thief," Jennifer insisted sternly. "I'm danged if I'm going tuh run away."

Panting, sobbing, the boy had cinched the saddle. With a fierce yank he flung the bridle from its hook on the wall.

"You *must* go," he insisted. "They won't give you no time tuh explain. I heard Mell tell Dorgan that the sheriff's away and they're goin' tuh take you out to—to the big cottonwood and—and—" Again his voice broke.

In spite of himself Chris Jennifer

was impressed. Fear laid chill fingers on his heart.

Well he knew the standing of a horse thief. And well he guessed the value of the stock he had helped drive into La Cascada. What if he denied all knowledge of the start of that drive? What if he did repudiate any connection with Breen and his mates? Would it avail him anything?

Given time, a court trial, he could surely prove his innocence. But, to be taken out now, to that cottonwood! The hair roots on his scalp prickled.

"Oh, go! Go!" the boy breathed, thrusting the reins into Jennifer's hand. "Head out the back, and you'll hit the river in five minutes. Follow that. There's places tuh hide, and you've got your gun tuh stand 'em off with."

Chris was young and life was sweet. As he hesitated, clasping the reins, he realized that some, at least, of the riders who had gone toward the railroad, were returning. That decided him. Quickly he backed the chestnut from her stall.

At that moment Harvey Mell and a fiercely bewhiskered man, accompanied by Dorgan, rounded the end of the hotel.

"That's him!" the latter shouted, pointing.

Mell rested a hand on his gun with a sharp, "Halt, there!" The bewhiskered man drew his weapon.

Jennifer's toe was in the stirrup. His mount, startled, perhaps by the shout, plunged wildly.

It appeared that Chris was mounting to flee in defiance of the order, and Mell's companion fired instantly. The ball touched neither the man nor his mount, but the boy's body sagged limply to the ground.

A red rage surged through Chris Jennifer. "Damn you! You've shot the kid!" he yelled. Swiftly he drew his own gun to let go wildly at the group, which was by now augmented by those who had been in front of the hotel.

"He's got Mell!" came the cry.

Jennifer had emptied his gun. He no longer thought of running away, for that lurid rage inside him seethed higher every instant. He would fight with his bare hands! He would tear them to pieces!

There came other shots, hoarse shouts, a very pandemonium. He scarcely felt the bullet which bored through his left leg. As he slumped down he cried:

"I'll choke the first one of you that touches me!"

He succeeded in planting a stiff jab on the black-whiskered man's nose before a gun butt tap brought insensibility.

MORE than an hour later he aroused to find himself in the bed he had occupied on the previous night. A red-faced man with a particularly hard eye was mounting guard in the open door.

"Come to, have yeh, young feller-behanged?" he growled.

Jennifer stared silently for a moment. Neither the spell of unconsciousness nor the stabbing pain in his leg mitigated the rage which poured through every vein and artery with each beat of his heart.

"I don't like your tone," he said, lips narrowed against his teeth.

"Well, I don't like yours—you ornery hawss thief!" the other spat.

"I'm no hawss thief," the other denied stoutly. "You all had no right tuh jump me like that—and shoot th' kid!"

"He ain't daid," the other allowed grudgingly.

Jennifer drew a sigh of relief. That the boy had been shot in his stead was an intolerable thought.

"Looka here, you hard-boiled gazabe," he enunciated expressively, if weakly, "you fellas have got tuh listen to the truth. I—"

"I ain't listenin' tuh none of your lies," was the harsh reply. "You shut up or I'll give yuh another silencer!

The doctor's tryin' to patch up Harve Mell, the man you tried to kill. If he dies—a rope necktie for yours—pronto!"

The guard refused to talk, to listen to another word. When the doctor came he bore a grave face, but his news was cheering.

"Harve always was sort of hard-headed," he said with grim humor, "so your bullet didn't go all the ways through his skull. I reckon he'll be on the job again in a few days. As for Squinty—he'll be a mighty sick kid for a spell, but he'll pull through."

At Jennifer's insistence the doctor listened to his statement of the facts. "I'll tell the Star-M foreman what you say—and Miss Judith," he finally agreed. "But you'll have to do some proving-up on that story."

"Miss Judith?" Jennifer murmured.

"Harvey's sister. Her pony burned the trail after the posse her brother led. She's with him now." With that the doctor left the room.

So that vividly pretty girl was under the same roof. Did *she* believe him to be a horse thief? His face burned at the thought. Chris suddenly knew that he very much wanted the good opinion of that particular girl—and not a sisterly opinion, either!

A few minutes later she appeared at his door. "I want you to repeat to me what you told the doctor," she told him simply. Her manner and expression were grave and Chris winced under her gaze.

But his own eyes did not waver as he gave her look for look. He *must* make this girl believe him!

"You say," she halted him presently, "that you were—so—so intoxicated at Hexo that you hadn't fully recovered your senses when you agreed to ride with Breen and his pals?"

"That's so, miss. I didn't have sense enough tuh choose my trail mates."

At the finish of his narrative, which she did not again interrupt, he stammered:

"Miss Mell—I—I didn't go for to shoot your brother, and I'm plumb sorry. I was so danged mad at them jumping at me thataway that when they shot the little feller I just saw red. I let off my gun at the whole bunch."

She nodded but he could not tell from her expression what she thought.

And the fever in his leg combined with the feverish thoughts in his brain, to create a day of torture.

He soon comprehended that the black-whiskered man was the Star-M foreman and that he, in company with several of the crew, were in favor of dealing summarily with Jennifer without awaiting the return of the sheriff, nor indeed without awaiting Harvey Mell's dictum, when he should be able to judge.

Booted men conferred outside his door; scraps of their talk were audible. The fears which had stung Chris Jennifer in the early morning returned a hundredfold. At times he felt he must burst into screaming that he was innocent. They must believe him. But he conquered these surges of feeling. None of the men was in any mood to listen to protests. His very manhood precluded that he cry to them like a whining infant.

After dusk there was less confusion. Guard was maintained but no more discussions were held in the narrow corridor. Jennifer dropped into a doze and the strained muscles of his face relaxed into a smile, for he was dreaming that he was riding along a grassy trail into a golden sunset with Judith.

A harsh command shattered the vision, wakened Jennifer to a cruel reality. The foreman of the Star-M and three other grim-visaged men were in his room.

"Your pals look to have got clean away," the former growled, "and the boys that trailed the hawsses ain't brought in no good news yet. I reckon that bunch is plumb gone. We're going tuh make an example of you that'll make these smart rustling gazabes sit up and take notice."

As he spoke he shifted the coil of rope in his hands.

"You mean," Chris Jennifer was amazed at the steadiness of his own voice though the perspiration was starting from his pores while his spinal column seemed to have turned to ice, "to say that you're going to take a helpless man out and hang him?"

"No! No, they're *not!*" came a cry from the hall.

Judith Mell crossed the threshold with a rush.

"Abe Stimson," she addressed the foreman, "throw that rope away! You had no right to go over Harve's head like this. He'll be plumb angry. Doc Griner and I've been talking to him and he don't believe this man had any hand in the stealing."

One of the men muttered angrily and Judith moved nearer the bed as if she would form a barrier between Jennifer and the others.

"He's some alibi baby," Stimson growled, "but I didn't think he'd put it over on you, Miss Judith. And when he shot your brother, too!"

"He wouldn't have shot Harve if you hadn't been so quick on the trigger," she flared. "You'd oughtuh be punished for what you did to poor Squinty. Now, listen!" She tapped her booted foot smartly on the floor. "The doctor located one of the bootlegging crowd that were at Hexo playing poker that night, and they bear out Jennifer's story. I'm ashamed of you. Clear out, now, every one of you!"

They obeyed. Some sheepishly and, at least one, with grumbling reluctance.

"You didn't half believe me yourself, this afternoon," Chris said. "What made you change your mind?"

"Well," she regarded him appraisingly, "I was talking to Squinty and he said he didn't see how a feller as good as Jennifer could've stole anything. But he declared he was ready to stand by you whatever you'd done. I reckoned it was time you at least had your story checked up on before you were condemned."

"I didn't expect tuh get off so easy," he sighed, relaxing for the first time.

"I didn't say you were to be let go right now," she corrected. "Harvey says he's going to have you brought to the Star-M where he can keep an eye on you for a while." A demure smile curved her lips.

"Fine!" he exclaimed, grinning boyishly. "I call that a reward, not a punishment. And—and you don't think I'm—I'm—"

"I think you're a red-headed *kid*," she laughed, turning toward the door.

"Wait!" he cried, grown daring with reaction from fear and the encouragement of the girl's smile. "When those men wakened me I was dreaming that you and I were riding together, into a golden sunset. Judith!" his tone was firm though low and he raised himself on one elbow to regard her steadily, "Judith, we're a-going tuh take that ride some day."

She returned his regard as steadily, but her breath fluttered in her throat while her breast rose and fell rapidly beneath the blue silk blouse that matched her eyes.

"Yes," he nodded gravely, "when your brother has kept his eye on me a while I'm a-going tuh ask yuh—"

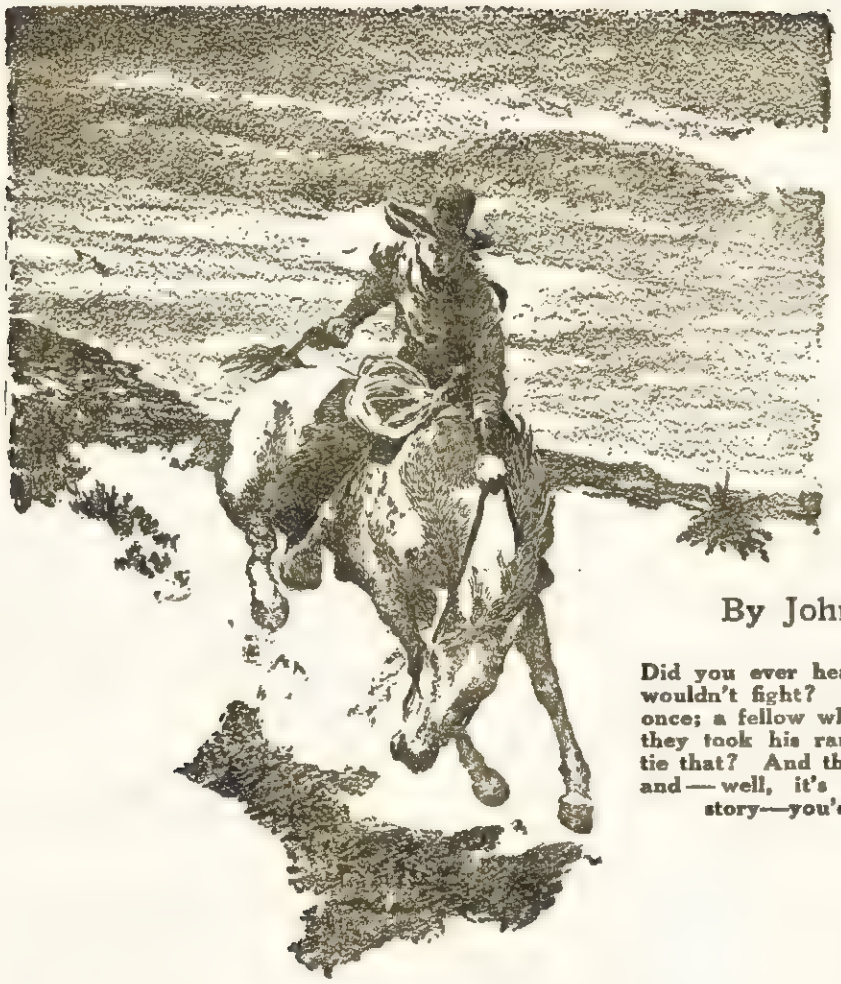
"Don't!" She raised a protesting hand.

Jennifer gazed at her, puzzled, then with a shade of apprehension.

"I mean," she said, a bit breathlessly, "that I never did like to have people tell me of nice things they intended to do at some future time. It's so hard to wait."

An eager light dawned in his eyes. "Judith—girl!" he murmured.

"When—when you are able to ride you can tell me what you want to." She laughed, a low throaty gurgle, and crossed the threshold to turn, just outside the door, and give him one last, flashing glance with a butterfly gesture of her fingertips from her lips to his.



Conroy's Ride

By John Johnson

Did you ever hear of a cowboy who wouldn't fight? Yeah, there was one once; a fellow who just grinned when they took his ranch away. Can you tie that? And then they took his girl and — well, it's a rip-snortin' good story — you'd better read it.

ONE day Dan Conroy returned to Colton, after six months spent in trailing a herd down to Sonora. Everybody was glad to see him again, for he was the best liked young man in the county.

Things had happened back home, in Dan's absence. His father, Sheriff Flint Conroy, had been killed in a gunfight, leaving him sole owner of the great XL Ranch. His sweetheart, Alice Reed, had grown half an inch taller and very much prettier.

"Too bad about yore dad. But he died fightin', like he lived," they told him in Colton.

"Yes," said Dan.

"Yore second cousin, Will Blake, got himself elected sheriff," came further information. "He's got a gang of shady hombres around him, and he's in solid with everybody. And he's been hangin' around yore girl considerable. I wouldn't stand fer that if I was you."

"Yeah?" Dan laughed. "Well, he's got a right to, I reckon." And he departed.

"Huh! He ain't the man his father was!" grunted a listener. "Old Flint was hell on wheels, but this son of his is so mild that butter wouldn't melt in his mouth!" Which was the general opinion.

Dan went up to see Alice again. She was slim and dark, with a fine-cut face and smoldering black eyes. Every time he saw her a thrill went through him.

"What, back again?" she asked.

"Can't stay away," he answered. He sat on the porch rail and rolled a cigarette.

"I'm sorry about—your father, Dan," said Alice.

"Yeah." Dan's face was suddenly

very sober. "I loved Dad. But the Mex who shot him died ten minutes later, so there's nothin' to be done about it." There was silence then.

Presently Dan said, "I hear you've been seein' Will Blake quite a bit lately, Alice."

"Yes, I have." She looked at him challengingly. "Why? Jealous?"

"Sort of." Dan lit his cigarette. "You know I've always loved you, Alice. And I don't like Will Blake. But you got the right to see who you like, so I've got nothin' to say."

"Oh, Dan," she laughed. "Don't you ever get mad?" She looked at him. He was six feet three, broad-shouldered and very strong. Yet seeing his youthful face, his dancing gray eyes and eternal cheerfulness, she could think of him only as an adorable small boy. "I've never seen you angry, Dan."

"What's the use?" said Dan cheerfully. "Life's too short."

Alice's father, old Baldy Reed, approached. "Well, Dan, yo're a big rancher now, so I guess yuh won't be callin' on poor homesteaders like us."

"I'm too lazy to be a big rancher, Mr. Reed," said Dan. "I'm goin' to make my foreman do all the work. And as fer comin' here, I'm callin' as often as Alice will let me."

"Which is no more than three times a week," announced the girl firmly.

Dan shrugged. "All right," he said.

He rode home to his XL Ranch, the biggest outfit in the county. He took his foreman, Steve Harkins, aside. They were old pals, had been on the trail herd to Sonora together. "Steve, do me a favor," said Dan.

"Sure," said Steve.

"Run this ranch for me like it was yore own," said Dan. "It's in yore hands. I'm goin' away."

"The hell!" said Steve.

Dan yawned and grinned. "Me, I don't like hard work. Ain't built for it," he explained. "I'm goin' up to the little mountain ranch. Up there it's wild and lonely, and there's fishin' and huntin' and wild mustangs. And a man can lay on his back and watch the clouds drift past when he wants to. You take care of things, Steve."

"All right," said Steve. "Ain't you comin' down here at all, Dan?"

"Sure. I'm seein' Alice three times a week," said Dan.

That afternoon he rolled his blanket, loaded supplies on a burro and rode north. Deep in the mountains Flint Conroy had bought a piece of land and built a cabin on it, and Dan was going up there to live. His hands watched him depart.

"Hell!" scoffed a cowpuncher. "He ain't—"

The foreman scowled, and cried, "Shut up! I'll lick the coyote who says Dan ain't the man his father was!" There was silence.

THE following Saturday Steve Harkins went to Colton and got drunk. This was nothing new, as it had been the old foreman's custom for years. But on this occasion he wore two medals from the Mexican government on his breast.

"What's those?" asked the bystanders.

"They ain't mine. Dan won 'em. He went on the prod once, down in Sonora," explained the reeling cowman.

"The hell you say!"

"S' fact," said Steve. "Down in Sonora we was trailin' our prize herd through a valley, an' one o' the waddies got lost. Pretty soon we found him. He'd been ambushed by a gang of bandits and shot through the back. Says Dan then, 'I'm settlin' this myself! Stay back!' And he rode off like a bat out of hell."

"And what then?" asked the bartender sceptically.

"Next mornin' we found him. There was five dead outlaws layin' in a canyon, and Dan in the middle of 'em, shot up plenty, but cheerful. 'I lost my temper,' he says. And the Mex government gave him these medals fer the job."

"Yuh musta bought them trinkets,"

asserted a lounger. "If I know Dan, yuh could steal his shirt and he'd give yuh his bandanna besides."

"Only time I ever saw Dan mad," said Steve, taking another drink. "S' funny thing, too. When he gets on the prod, his gray eyes turn sort of dark, like blue steel."

"Maybe it's true," said the bartender, winking at the others. "But if it is, I'll be willin' to b'lieve elephants roost in trees."

Steve drew his gun. "I'll shoot the man who says it's a lie!" he cried tipsily. "And I'll shoot anybody who says Dan ain't the man his—his—" At this point liquor overcame him, and he collapsed.

MEANWHILE Dan Conroy, who was neither tame nor industrious nor practical, stayed in the mountains and lived the life he loved.

Sometimes he roped one of the wild mustangs, saddled and broke it after a hard fight. He kept two chipmunks and a raccoon as pets in his cabin. He lived like a primitive man, and enjoyed it all. And three evenings a week he rode in to see Alice.

"I love you, Alice," he would say.

"But I don't know whether I love you," Alice answered. "You're so strange, Dan."

He laughed and shrugged. "Well, that's the way I am. Take me or leave me!"

Then one evening he came to the XL, and Alice met him, white-faced. "Don't stop, Dan. Ride to the XL," she said. "There's trouble!"

There was a grim tenseness in the air when he got to his ranch. A gang of horsemen stood facing the ranch house porch. Sheriff Will Blake and four hard-faced deputies were in front. Behind them were the prosecutor, the county clerk, and a few others. And on the porch were the buckaroos of the XL, ranged in a row with hands on gun butts.

It looked like a fight. "What's up?" cried Dan.

His second cousin turned with a sneering smile. "There you are, Dan! Glad to see you. I've got somethin' fer you." There was mockery in his voice, and he held out a paper.

Dan read it. It was a mortgage on the XL for fifty thousand dollars, due that day to Will Blake. At the bottom was his father's signature in a shaky hand.

"This is a surprise," said Dan.

"I came yesterday and gave notice. Guess yore men couldn't locate you," said Will. "Sorry, but I'm here now to take possession. Better not make trouble, Dan."

Dan shrugged and walked over to his men. "Dan, that's a forgery and a dirty frame-up," growled old Steve. "We're with you. Say the word and we'll fight it out, law or no law!" A growl from the punchers echoed his words.

But Dan smiled and shook his head. "No. No trouble, Steve. You and the boys stay on here. Anyway, I've got the mountain ranch left." So, casually, he gave up the great XL Ranch, gathered his personal belongings and went away.

He told Alice, and she was amazed. "But Dan, you've lost a fortune, and you don't seem to care! Doesn't money mean anything to you?"

"Oh, well," said Dan, "I still have twenty thousand coming for the herd we took to Sonora."

"I'll bet you haven't a receipt or anything to show for those cattle," said Alice.

"No, you're right." Dan laughed and pinched her cheek. "You are shrewd, Alice. But don't worry, that rancher Garcia will pay. He is an honest man."

And it developed that Garcia was an honest man. A week later a check came for the twenty thousand. Dan took it to the Colton bank to cash.

"But why so much money, Dan? You'll be robbed!" protested the teller.

"Oh, no," laughed Dan. "Anyway, when I buy something I want ready cash." So they cleaned out the bank

vaults for him, and he stuffed the bills in his saddle bags and departed.

On the homeward ride that night it was dark, with only the starlight to go by. As Dan rode into the mountains he saw the dim figure of a man ahead of him in the trail. This man, seen in profile, seemed to have the long nose and tight-lipped mouth of Will Blake. Dan reined in his horse and called, "Is that you, Will?"

The dim figure did not answer, but only whistled shrilly. At that three men leaped swiftly from the darkness upon Dan, and one of them struck him on the head and he went down senseless.

Dan came to at dawn. His money was gone.

He rode back to Colton to Sheriff Will Blake's office and reported the matter.

At the reference to himself the sheriff became abusive. "So yuh thought I was there, did yuh?" he roared. "Damn yuh, are yuh tryin' to accuse me of havin' a hand in it? Well, yo're a dirty, lyin' dog!"

At this the bystanders sought cover. Those were fighting words, and Dan and the sheriff each carried two revolvers.

But Dan only grinned. "Don't get excited, Will. I only said that the man looked like you. It must have been someone else." Then he turned away.

A bystander called, "What do yuh wear them two guns fer, Dan?"

"Why, to shoot rabbits and coyotes with," said Dan calmly, and went on.

Soon afterwards he met John Pearce, a lawyer and an old friend. "I've heard about it, Dan," said Pearce. His face hardened. "That coyote Blake is behind it all, too. He's cleaned you out. And he's got the whole county in his hand—the judge, prosecutor, clerk and all. There's no justice here any more."

"Yes," said Dan, and rolled a cigarette.

"But he won't get by forever," said Pearce. He lowered his voice. "Keep this to yourself, Dan. The nester Reed and I are goin' to send a petition to the Governor to have Blake removed from office."

"Alice's father, eh? That will be fine," said Dan. "I don't like Will Blake."

That night Dan went to see Alice, and found her pale and tense. "Dan," she said, "everybody in the county is laughing at you. They call you a fool and a coward."

"Yes?" said Dan.

"Oh, don't you see?" she said. "You've been robbed of your ranch and your money, you've been insulted to your face, and yet you don't fight back! What else could people think?"

Dan shrugged. "I'm not a fool or a coward, Alice," he said. "I simply don't care about such things. They don't get me mad. And I can't fight unless I get mad."

"Don't you care for anything?" she asked.

"Well, most people want money, but I don't," said Dan. "And I could even stand to lose the mountain ranch, because I'd go back in the wilds then. But there is one thing I care for." He put his hand under her chin, and said, "It's you, Alice. I've always loved you, and always will. But, well, I guess you don't care for me."

She tossed her head. "Well, I'd be a fool if I did. Will Blake proposes every time he sees me, and he calls twice a week. He is a rich man now, Dan."

Dan withdrew from her. "Yes," he said. "And I'm a poor man, Alice. Why—" he laughed, "all I have is the mountain ranch and a bunch of wild mustangs."

"I'd be a fool if I cared for you," said Alice. Her lips trembled. Suddenly she leaned her head on his shoulder, sobbing. "I am a fool. Don't you see? I love you, Dan!"

Then Dan, trembling, took her in his arms and kissed her. "Gee, I never knew you felt like that," he whispered.

Her bright dark eyes met his. "I'm afraid you'll never amount to much,

Dan, as far as money goes," she said. "You'll always be strange and different, and they'll always be laughing at you. But I—" She looked at him, and he seemed a gentle, adorable small boy. "I love you, Dan."

Dan kissed her again. "Alice!" he said. Then he arose. "I just thought —I'm flat broke! But there are lots of wild mustangs up on the mountain ranch, and I can break them and sell them for forty dollars apiece. I'll stay up there a month, and get a whole herd. Then I can buy you a fine ring, Alice!"

"Don't stay away too long," she laughed. "Will Blake calls often, and he always proposes!"

"I won't worry about him," said Dan. "Good-by, Alice!" And he went up to his mountain ranch.

He built a corral and rounded up a herd of mustangs. Then he proceeded to break them. They were fierce and wild, and the very touch of a saddle threw them into a frenzy. But Dan was a master rider, and he fought and subdued them. In three weeks he had a bunch of half-broken horses in his corral. Another week of "gentling" would polish them off, make them fit for sale as cow-ponies.

Then one morning he went over to a little mountain store for tobacco.

This store was a tough place, its chief sales being in moonshine liquor. When Dan arrived a celebration was going on. One half-tipsy scar-faced fellow held the center of the floor.

"Yes, I mean Dan Conroy," said this man. At the sound of his own name Dan stopped by the open window, as though suddenly frozen, and listened.

"First he stole the ranch with a fake mortgage," said the scar-faced man. "Then he had the boy slugged and took the last cent off of him. And—get this, boys," he leaned forward, laughing loudly, "now he's got Dan's girl!"

"The hell you say!" exclaimed the storekeeper.

"Yeah. He planted a couple of XL cowhides in the hombre's barn, and then arrested him fer rustlin'. They was a twenty-year sentence hangin' over Reed unless the authorities was willin' to shut their eyes. So when the boss proposed to Alice, nacher'lly she said yes. Now the old man's loose again, and the weddin's to-morrow."

The crowd laughed, but the storekeeper shook his head. "It sounds fishy to me," he said.

"Yeah? Well, if yuh don't believe me, go over there and call up the boss," said the scar-faced man. "I'm his right-hand man, ain't I? I was in on the sluggin' that night!"

Then Dan Conroy came in the front door. He walked slowly, and his face was without its usual smile. Also, his eyes seemed to be a sort of steel-blue. "Who did all this? Who are you talking about?" he asked.

"Who in blazes d'yuh s'pose? Will Blake, of course." The scar-faced man scowled. "And what's it to you?"

"I'm Dan Conroy," said Dan.

"Yeah?" The scar-faced man went back a step. Then he laughed. "Well, and what are yuh gonna do about it?"

Dan slapped the man across the mouth with his open hand. "Sober up in a hurry, you," he said quietly. "I don't fight a drunken man. When you get sober, I am going to kill you."

He spoke in a low tone, but there was something in his voice that made the listeners tame. The scar-faced man turned white, then reddened with fury. "Just wait! I'll get yuh!" He went out to the pump, and friends doused his head with cold water.

Meanwhile Dan went to the phone and called the sheriff's office. All the rest stood by in silence.

"I want to speak to the sheriff," said Dan. A moment's pause. "Is that you, Will Blake? This is Dan Conroy speaking. I hear you are trying to take Alice away from me. You have gone too far, Blake. I am coming down to kill you."

He slammed down the receiver and turned. Just then the scar-faced man rushed in again, half sobered and mad with rage, with his gun in his hand.

Dan drew like a flash, and shot him through the heart.

Dan swept the room with his burning steel-blue eyes, and no one moved. He turned, stepped across the body of the scar-faced man and went outside. He mounted his bronc, swung him toward the trail to Colton, and gave him the spur. Thus began what was afterwards known in local history as Conroy's ride.

DAN came down toward Colton, hell-bent. Will Blake, forewarned, had his deputies out. "Conroy's on the prod. Stop him! Kill him on sight!" were the orders. From their various stations the deputies rode over to guard the Colton trail.

At Pine Hill, Dan was ambushed by two deputies. They gave him a volley, but he bent low in the saddle and escaped in a shower of bullets.

A mile farther on there was a deputy waiting behind a tree with his rifle ready. He took a pot-shot at the flying horseman, and missed. By this time Dan was wild with rage at being hunted like a rabbit. He turned aside and charged.

He drew his guns as he came, but had no need to use them. Before the rifleman could fire again, Dan's half-wild mustang was upon him, lashing out with both front hoofs. The rifleman cried out once, and then lay still. Dan swung about, and rode on.

Seven miles from Colton the trail runs through a narrow little ravine for a half mile. In the center of it, at the bottom of a steep descent, barbed wire had been stretched across the trail. A drunken gunman had fixed that, and had then gone back to Black Creek ford.

Dan came down the slope at top speed. When he caught sight of the barrier it was too late to stop. Dan spurred the horse again, and jerked his head up. The mustang rose in the air in a mighty leap. He cleared the wire and came down safely on the other side, and so went on.

Dan crossed the Black Creek ford, and the drunken gunman and a pal were waiting for him on the other side. The two rose from cover just as Dan's horse struggled to the water's edge. They fired together.

The mustang caught a bullet in the head, and reared up with a scream. Then he fell backwards, with his rider beneath him.

"Got him!" cried the gunmen. But the fall only stunned Dan, and gave him a cracked rib. The shock of the cold water instantly revived him. He struggled out from under his horse, and rose up with a gun in each hand.

He pulled down on both men at once, and his revolvers roared. At the report one man dropped like a stone, and the other staggered back, his Colt discharging harmlessly as he fell.

Dan came ashore then, and ran to where his victims' horses were picketed behind a sagebush. He took one of the broncs, and rode on.

Now the trail to Colton lay clear ahead, and the bronc came on swiftly. But even so it seemed slow to Dan, and he constantly gave his horse the spur. His friends would hardly have known him now. His face was white and set, his jaw clenched, and the veins stood out on his forehead. Dan Conroy was angry at last.

He thundered down the main street of the town, and people got out of the way in fear when he passed.

So he came to the sheriff's office, leaped from his horse and flung the door wide. Inside, Sheriff Blake and his best three deputies were waiting. They jumped to their feet when he entered. He stood on the threshold for a long moment, his hands on his gun butts, saying nothing, only looking at the others with his burning steel-blue eyes. The bystanders held their breaths.

Then Dan said softly, "Will Blake, I have come to kill you." Blake's reply was a snarl, a swift grab for his gun.

The details of that gunfight are difficult to describe. There were no sur-

viving witnesses except Dan Conroy, and Dan would never speak of it afterward. At any rate, a sudden volley broke out, and the little room fairly rocked with the smashing roar of Colt .45's. Dan Conroy stood on the threshold, crouched forward, firing, firing.

The watchers outside saw Dan stagger suddenly, as though he were hit. But he went on shooting. Another bullet caught him, and he reeled and fell sideways into the sheriff's office, out of sight. There was a loud cry. Then several more shots, and silence.

After a pause one bystander said hoarsely, "We better go in." Several men started forward.

Then Dan appeared in the doorway. He held on to the door, white as death, and blood dripped from him. He reloaded one gun and gasped fiercely, "Get back, all of you!"

They cleared a path for him as he staggered to his bronc. No one tried to stop him as he rode out of Colton.

Then the bystanders rushed into the sheriff's office. Inside there were curling wisps of smoke in the air, and on the floor lay Will Blake and his three deputies, shot dead.

DAN stopped at a doctor's and had his wounds dressed. "Nothing serious," said the doctor. "Gunfight, eh?"

"Yes," said Dan. He went on toward the nester Reed's place, and met no one on the way. When he dismounted there he was already steadier, and the flow of blood had stopped.

Alice met him on the porch. "Dan! You're hurt!" she cried.

At the sight of her Dan's face lighted up, and he came and kissed her, and held her close. "Just a couple scratches," he said. "But you—are you all right, Alice?"

"Yes." Alice hung her head. "I suppose you've heard about me—and Will Blake."

"Yes," said Dan.

Suddenly Alice was sobbing. "Oh, Dan, what could I do? Blake could do what he wanted with Dad, and I had to save him some way, didn't I? And you didn't come, Dan. So, I promised—" She drew closer in his arms.

"Don't worry, Alice," said Dan. "You won't have to keep your promise. I've killed Will Blake."

"Killed him?"

"Yes. Blake and some of his deputies. I got mad to-day, Alice. I would kill anyone who tried to come between you and me. I love you, Alice." He touched her cheek and smiled. In her presence his great anger had left him. The hard lines were gone from his face, the cold, steel-blue light from his eyes. He was the old Dan Conroy again, a gentle, adorable small boy.

He kissed Alice once more, then drew away. "I must go now. I'm an outlaw. I killed the sheriff and several deputies, and they'll be hunting me." He sighed. "But some day I'll be back, Alice."

"Wait!" she called. She was very pale. "I'll go with you, Dan. If you're an outlaw, then I'll be one too. I can't ever be away from you."

Dan looked at her and trembled. "Come then," he said. He got a horse for her, and they started off. But before they had gone fifty yards a stern, gray-haired man with a badge on his breast came up and barred the way.

"Are you Dan Conroy?" asked the man.

"Yes," said Dan. The steel-blue light came into his eyes again, and he pushed his way ahead of Alice and grasped his guns. "But don't try to stop me, mister."

"Take it easy, Conroy." The man held up a protesting hand. "I'm an investigator from the Governor, with good news fer you. Here!"

Dan read the paper held out to him. It was a special proclamation from the Governor, which declared that law and order in the county had broken down, that Sheriff Blake and all county officials were removed from office, and that Mr. Daniel Conroy was appointed sheriff until an election could be held.

The paper was signed by the Governor.

"This is a surprise," said Dan.

"Yo're boss here now, savvy?" said the gray-haired man. "I've followed yore trail, and seen the men you smoked down. You must be hell with a gun." Then he paused, and frowned. "I been thinking it over. When you shot Blake and his no-'count deputies they was out of office and you was sheriff, even though nobody knew about it. They died resistin' an officer of the law, and there's no charges against you. So here's luck, Sheriff Conroy!" He held out his hand.

Dan grasped it wonderingly. "Thank you," he said.

He rode on with the girl at his side. "It's all right now, Alice," he said. "And now I must stop to see Steve Harkins."

The two came up to the XL ranch house. Alice's father, the foreman, and John Pearce, the lawyer, were there.

Alice went to her father, and he took her in his arms. "So you're free again, Dad!" she said.

"I got great news for you, Dan," said the old lawyer. "The county clerk's confessed that Blake forged the mortgage on the ranch, and he had you held up and robbed that night. The clerk was in with Blake on the deal. So you'll get your money and your ranch back in just a few days. I'll see to that."

The amazing good news did not seem to impress Dan much. "You're a real friend, Mr. Pearce," he said. Then he turned to the girl and laughed. "Why, I'm a rich man again, Alice! I won't have to break mustangs for a living!"

"And you, Steve," he told his foreman. "You take charge of things. You'll be chief deputy and run the ranch too. I'm not a fighter or a rancher either."

"No?" asked Steve, raising his eyebrows. "Well, it's all right with me. And what are you goin' to do, Dan?"

"Me?" Dan turned and looked into Alice's dark eyes, and she looked back at him. "Alice and I are going down now to be married. After that we'll go up to the mountain ranch. I want you to come to the minister's with us, Mr. Reed. And you too, Mr. Pearce."

So presently the party of four rode away, with Dan and Alice side by side. "Good-by, boys!" Dan turned and waved at them. "I'll be back sometime. Take care of things!" He rode away with the girl, a strange primitive sort of man, careless and impractical, and boyish, a man who cared for only one thing on earth—Alice Reed. And she rode along by his side. Which was the end of Conroy's ride.

The XL buckaroos stood staring after them. "Great guns! He smokes down a whole gang of killers, and then he says he ain't a fighter!" they said.

"He ain't," said Steve. "He's hell when he gets started, but he's got to get mad first. It happened once down in Sonora. And now it's happened again, account of Alice."

"More'n likely this is the last time, too," grunted the horse wrangler pessimistically. "Alice'll have to watch him close, so people don't steal the golden fillin's out of his teeth!"

"Well, of all the peculiar gents I've ever seen, this hombre takes the cake," opined the cook.

"Maybeso," said the foreman. "But Dan's a great boy. And I'll lick the coyote who says he ain't the man his father was!"

There was no answer to that.

The Ring of Fire

By Herbert A. Woodbury

This Western man was daring and quick to act. He knew no fear. Through a wall of leaping flames he rode to save a lovely girl and gain a promise of eternal joy.

IT was mid-winter with accompanying snow and ice in the rest of the world. But here at the crossroads, where the old wagon trail to Pima City turns off the great Bankhead highway, the afternoon sun beat down grimly on a wide desert plain. A little to the right, a cholla forest stretched away in palest green. Beyond, the first low foothills of the Catalina Range commenced to scramble on upward through varying oranges and blues to the inky Catalinas themselves.

Art Hadley, bronzed under the shade of a rather military-looking Stetson, had slid his roadster to a halt for a better look at the road marker. He was driving to the coast on business from his home in Texas, and he had paused here to look for a short cut. He lingered on, though, to enjoy a good laugh as he read the two cardboard signs recently nailed to the post.

After a moment or so, he was conscious that he was not alone. A young girl had looped up, and now she, too, was regarding the two signs.

"Looks like an argument, don't it?" he commented affably. And his smiling blue eyes betrayed a youth that wasn't quite so evident in the grayish hair about his temples.

Joyce Thorndyke stared for a moment at the man in the roadster, and then for a further moment at the two signs.

"It's an outrage," she said.

She was sitting a little buckskin decked out with a brand-new saddle and a heavily silvered bit. She wore blue jeans, a purple silk blouse and a green silk bandanna. And Art Hadley noticed that the dark hair, which blew about under the shadowy brim of her silver beaver, was that magic shade of chestnut which is neither quite gold nor quite brown, but is lovely.

She was altogether a very trim young person whose opinions a man felt bound to respect. Even a man who had worked so hard that he was a bit gray at thirty.

Art's grin died at once. "An outrage?" he inquired.

"Look," she said, pointing at the smaller of the two signs. "It's Pima City's thirtieth annual mid-winter punchers' parada. We've had New Year's week for positively ages. What right has Greasewood Junction to horn in an' throw a rodeo the very same time?"

Art wasn't quite sure of the ethics of the case, but the way the girl stated

things aroused his sympathy at once.

"Oh, well," he said solicitously, "if you been throwin' a show every year for thirty years like you say, you'll git all the crowd this year. No need a-worryin'."

Joyce smiled wryly.

"I'm not so sure, mister. Bill Clark—he's managing this thing at Greasewood Junction—sorta stole a march on us this year.

"Jumped in an' signed up all the fancy talent like Elsie Jones, the only woman bulldogger, an' Homer Young that won the Roosevelt Cup, an' the Moore twins, an' Spike Donavan with his mule, an' Yakima Jake, an' a lot of others. He promised 'em lower entry fees an' bigger prizes. I don't see how he can afford to, though. He must be savin' money on cheap construction work, or somethin'!"

Joyce broke off to sigh.

"All our local boys are loyal, o' course," she went on. "They're gonna ride in our show. An' our own folks'll come to see 'em. But you can't make a rodeo jest on your own patronage. It's the folks that come all the way from Phoenix an' Tucson an' Nogales that put it over. An' they'll go where the star performers are goin'."

Art nodded thoughtfully.

"Star performers help a lot," he said. "I've found that out in my business."

"Bill Clark's jest doin' it outa spite, too," she said. "He managed our show two or three years till we found out he was takin' too big a rake-off. The money we make goes to the Elks' Hospital, here," she went on, "an' whatever Bill makes over at Greasewood Junction he's goin' to keep."

Art pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Gosh," he reflected aloud, "if we only had *our* show."

"*Your* show?" gasped Joyce. "Good grief, mister, don't tell me that some other little cowtown round here's throwin' one, too. Three'd be jest about too much—"

Art laughed softly.

"I mean Hadley Brothers Bar S Wild West," he said. "You've heard of us, I reckon."

He thought for a moment that her cordiality had waned somewhat.

"A circus," she said. "Oh, I should think you'd hate that—travelin' all the time."

And Art wondered for the moment why he was a little upset. He went on, though:

"I was jest thinkin' that if I'd known earlier, I could of brought you all our stars. But as I say, we went into winter quarters two months ago, an' the Lord only knows where our guys are scattered to. They never leave no addresses. Jest sort of turn up again in the spring."

"It's nice of you to think of it, anyway," smiled Joyce.

Art flushed. Something told him that if he were to be around this girl very long, he'd be apt to think of a great many things. And not all of them connected with the show business, either.

"I'll tell you, though," he said suddenly. "By gosh! The very ticket! There's Jim Montino—you know, the big Western star that Wolfe Films let out this fall 'count o' him bein' three-fourths Mex, an' can't talk like a dashin' hero in these here new squawkies.

"He used to pack 'em in for the silents. Don't you remember, him an' his trick hoss, Golden Fizz? We got him signed up for next year with the circus, an' I've got his Hollywood address. What do you think, now? Jim Montino in person! How's that fer a drawin' card?"

Joyce flushed radiantly, and then frowned.

"But good gosh, Mr.—"

"Call me Art," he suggested. "I've got a notion I'm goin' to be round here quite some time."

"All right then, Art—" She smiled half shyly. "But, Art, wouldn't Jim Montino cost us a whole mint o' money? They say he was draggin' down five thousand a week with Wolfe."

"He might work for less," said Art; "him bein' out of a job. Anyway, don't you worry one little speck. Managin' performers is my business. Jest you leave this up to me."

And, abruptly, a man who believed that adventure and romance had nothing to do with people in business, began to thrill to his finger tips. In a second he altered his plans for the next two weeks.

IT was arranged. The great Jim Montino condescended, for a mere three thousand dollars, to headline in the Pima City mid-winter punchers' parada.

And the day he arrived, Art Hadley and Joyce Thorndyke escorted him to the rodeo grounds, where he was to rehearse his bag of tricks.

The two climbed up on the fence of one of the empty chutes.

Montino tore down the field, spinning out a fancy loop. This done, he returned at an easy lope, vaulting nimbly from one side of his pony to the other. He followed it up by standing on his saddle, for a final tour of the stands.

Then he reined in Golden Fizz before Joyce and Art.

"Eet ees splendeed—yes?" he inquired.

Art and Joyce exchanged slight frowns.

"I'm afraid not," said Art, "you see, any hick cowpoke can pull that stuff with about three weeks' practice. You'd have to show a real Western audience something pretty new."

Montino's olive face clouded angrily.

"You are not please—wiz zee one great artiste?"

And there was an evil warning in the ex-film star's green eyes, a warning that all would not go well unless he were treated with gloved hands.

With so much at stake, Art hastened to be conciliatory.

"Come on now, Jim," he cajoled, "you did some pretty good bulldoggin' an' bronc ridin' there in 'Call o' the Mesa.' Why couldn't you do that? Show folks what you could do to Blue Devil that ain't ever been rode."

"I use zee double in zee feelm," snapped Montino, "I am too valuable—see?"

Art frowned. He had half a notion to tell this conceited pup to go to the devil. But Joyce smiled sweetly at him.

"You didn't use a double in that fire scene in 'Gun Justice'," she said, "I remember. There was a close-up of you leaping through the flames."

Montino smiled.

"Ah, that was more easy, you see. Zee *caballo*, he go so sweeft—only a quarter second am I in zee flames. Zat scene is hard only on zee girl I rescue. She mus' wait."

Joyce glanced eagerly at Art.

"What do you say?" she challenged. "It'd look great from the stands, and I could—"

"Like heck you could," cried Art. And abruptly he felt a little weak about the pit of his stomach. "On a studio lot they can control a fire. They got all kinds o' gadgets an' whatama-things that make it look like a real flick when it ain't."

But Joyce had jumped down off the fence and had come up to Montino.

"Why couldn't we pull that scene?" she demanded. "The girl would be caught in the middle of the brush fire that's encircling her from all directions. You leap through the flames, scoop her up, and then jump out the other side."

She turned back to Art, all eagerness.

"Betcha Bill Clark wouldn't get all the crowd, if we advertised an act like that."

Good showman that Art was, he knew that Joyce had hit on a whale of a headliner. People would, indeed, pass up Elsie Jones and Homer Young to see a thing like the ring of fire. But—

He had no chance to protest.

Montino was saying: "If you like then, mees, we weel try her out. You would not be so good as Mees Gloria Dawn. Ah, she was the one sweet baby. But maybe you weel not be too dumb. Anyway, we can try him. The reesk ees not to me."

"Listen," commanded Art.

But Joyce whirled on him.

"What if there is a little risk?" she demanded. "If this act gets us a good share of the crowd, isn't it worth it?"

And Art caught a flash of resolve in the girl's voice which he admired, even though it terrified him.

He grew paler and paler the next few moments as he helped Joyce and Montino and a fair-grounds hanger-on make a circle of dried tumbleweed and mesquite twigs there on the bare 'dobe earth.

And he was positively weak by the time Joyce climbed inside it.

The helper was drenching the pile with gasoline, so that when he flicked a match into the brush, the circle would flare up simultaneously all around the ring.

Montino trotted Golden Fizz back a fair distance in order to get a good run for the flaming hurdle.

"You onerstan'," he warned, "I weel not wait zee seengle minute, inside. You mus' be ready for zee one great leap."

"I understand," shouted Joyce.

Art walked a few steps away. Then, abruptly, he started after the film star. He'd make him quit this nonsense. Dang it all, he'd—

But it was too late.

Montino had already shouted, "All right!"

And the man beside the brush had struck his match.

At once, the circle burst into a raging blaze. Great, hungry flames leaped up higher than a man, and in a second the fiery curtain shut out all view of Joyce.

Art heard the crack of a quirt and the instant thunder of hoofs. And then stood there, panic-stricken, as Montino suddenly reined in his mount.

"Zee flames are too high," said Montino complacently. "I guess you have use' too much gas."

Art was at the man's side in a single bound.

He didn't wait for him to refuse him his horse. Like a wildcat he tore the film star out of his saddle and hurled him aside.

The next instant it was Art who was in the saddle.

There was not much of a run left before the flaming barrier, but he spurred the great bay at it.

And wondered for one terrible moment whether the horse would balk and refuse.

But Golden Fizz was a thoroughbred if his master was not. He took off from two crouched hind legs that were like giant springs, and sailed through the flames.

Inside the circle, the heat was intense—like a raging inferno.

Art found Joyce dropped in a limp heap upon the ground. But the stout-hearted pony waited while he dismounted and took her into his arms. And a moment later, Golden Fizz made a second perfect jump—this time from a standstill.

Montino was upon them, almost before Art had brought Joyce to. The film star swaggered up angrily.

"You dog," he cried, "for zat I queet cold. You cannot lay han's on Don Jimminez de Montino, an' then expec'—"

"Get out," roared Art.

"An' I weel queet your Wil' Wes' next season, too."

Art advanced menacingly.

"You couldn't play with me next season if you wanted to, you dirty skunk. And jest so you won't forget it, take that."

So saying, Art emphasized his point by a fist driven into the actor's face.

Montino staggered back, his hand darting evilly to his hip.

He had forgotten, though. He had no weapon. His hand came up, empty. He doubled it into a fist which he shook furiously at Art.

"Nevaire min'," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Nevaire min'. I will get even, señor. You have advertise' me. People weel come. Mucho people. I weel not be here."

Art heard no more. He had dashed back to Joyce.

"Hurt terribly?" he asked, concern in his voice.

She smiled at him with the bravery which had both thrilled and terrified him a moment ago.

"Just burned a little on my arms and face," she said. "But, Art—" And her face clouded. "Look!"

He followed her glance to see Montino walking off the field with a flashily dressed puncher who had appeared as if by magic from out of nowhere.

"That's Bill Clark," she said; "he's been spying on us! Oh, Art, do you suppose—"

Art caught a snatch of conversation from down the field. "Zare ees nothing wrong with zee treeck. Nex' time, we weel jus' use not so much gas."

"It looks," said Art, suddenly frowning also, "it looks like we'd gone an' spent a lot o' money advertising Bill Clark's show. Don't it now?"

IT did look that way. As soon as they had secured Montino's services, Art and Joyce had put full-page advertisements in all the large dailies of the state, proclaiming with much ballyhoo that if Montino's public wanted to see him actually perform the stunts that had thrilled the picture world, they had only to come to Pima City the first, second, third and fourth of January.

Now, as the two of them jogged along the state highway, the day before the opening of the two rodeos, they saw a corps of men at work tacking signs to every telegraph post, every suhuaro stalk, and every mesquite along the way.

Art tore one down for a better look. It said:

FOLKS!!
If you've come all this way
To See
JIM MONTINO
See him at Greasewood Junction's
FIRST ANNUAL JUBILEE

After he had read it, Art tore the sign into shreds and let it fall through his fingers to the road.

"Well," he said, forcing a faint smile, "I reckon that's that. One thing, though. We didn't have to pay him in advance."

Two tears almost crowded into Joyce's eyes.

"We won't have anybody, now," she said. "With Montino and all the reg'lar rodeo riders both, Bill Clark'll get everybody."

Art reached across to take her hand. He was thinking to himself that a girl like this was a pretty rare gem. A girl who could get all worked up and worried over something like a hospital drive. The failure of the rodeo meant nothing to her, personally. She didn't stand to lose a thing. Nor had she stood to gain anything there, inside the ring of fire.

He thought that he liked a girl like that. Maybe he could even win her over to the circus idea.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'll tell you now. Why can't Hadley Brothers' Wild West Show give the Elks' Hospital five thousand dollars?"

Joyce looked at him in swift gratitude. "Oh, but—"

"No buts about it," he said. "I figger it's worth five thousand bucks to us jest to have Jim Montino break his contract for next year. Troupin' round's hard enough anyway, without havin' to humor along some temperamental palooka all the time."

Joyce smiled. She, too, was thinking to herself. She was thinking that it was mighty decent for a man as big as Art Hadley to have lingered on in Pima City just to help push a hick rodeo.

"The hospital could sure use the money, if you want to give it," she said. "An' I reckon that'd jest about solve the financial aspects o' the case. Only—" and she wrinkled her nose, "only there's more to this than jest the money, to me, anyway. I hate to see Bill Clark lick me."

Art gave her hand a little squeeze.

"That's the spirit," he said. And he forced a grin. "Maybe we ain't licked yet, though, Joyce. Maybe folks'll stop in Pima City, after all. Maybe they'll remember what a good show you've always given 'em before."

MAYBE, but it was a slim hope. And it began to look even slimmer the next day when the two rodeos opened. Car after car rolled over the great Bankhead highway that morning. And if any paused in Pima City it was only to take on enough gas to get the next ten miles into Greasewood Junction.

Art and Joyce sat at the fountain of the Owl Drug Store watching the never ending procession.

At about two they drove silently out to the fair grounds. And Art proved to the small gathering, that failed by a big margin to fill the stands, that all available talent was not in Greasewood Junction that afternoon.

He knew a trick or two himself, this man who had started in as a fancy rider in his father's circus. Joyce hazing, he bulldogged a steer in eight seconds. He rode Blue Devil to a standstill. And he and Joyce teamed up to win the thrilling pony express race.

Still, genuine as the applause was, it sounded weak in the almost empty stands. The afternoon closed ahead of time for lack of enthusiasm. At five, Art and Joyce were back in the drug store. Just in time, it happened, to see the first ambulance come over from Greasewood Junction. The driver shouted excitedly that there was another on the way. And that half a dozen private cars had been pressed into service to bring over the less seriously hurt.

"Nobody killed, though, which was a miracle!"

Joyce compressed her lips a little grimly.

"They're glad enough to use our hospital," she said, "even if they won't support it."

And then, abruptly, she noticed that Art was no longer with her. She caught sight of him dashing out the door and up the street, vaulting onto the running board of the ambulance as it slowed down for traffic.

"What was it?" he demanded.

"Stampede," said the driver of the gray car. "Cattle an' wild horses in the lower pens got outa control, crashed the fence, an' made for the grand stands.

"Well, nacherly, there was a rush. It'd of been all right, though, if them stands had been built proper. But Bill Clark tried to save money on 'em, I reckon. Everybody movin' round, shakin' 'em every which way like that, they collapsed. I reckon Clark'll have plenty o' damage claims on his hands 'fore this thing's over with."

The driver took a deep breath.

"There won't be a plugged nickel left fer prize money. The sheriff's got it all attached—entrance fees an' everything. Some o' them pore performers'll be left stranded, flatter'n hell."

"But what started it?" Art demanded.

"The fire. When them wild ponies sniffed the grass burning—creeping up closer an' closer on 'em, they went plumb loco."

"Fire?"

"Say, ain't you heard nothing? You know Jim Montino, don't you, the movie star? Well, he tried to pull some dizzy stunt called 'The Ring of Fire,' an'—"

In a flash, Art saw it.

"Good Lord," he gasped, "you don't mean they tried that fire act without cutting the grass on the field?"

The driver shook his head.

"They cut some. Figgered they couldn't afford to cut it all, an' that they didn't need to, long as the flames on that barrier didn't jump up more'n a foot. Some o' the sparks carried, though—"

"Thanks," said Art. And he swung off the ambulance.

In a moment he was calling Greasewood Junction by long distance. "Hello

—this the entrants' headquarters? Well, listen, you guys. I've got a proposition—"

His telephone call over, Art wasted not a minute. He hadn't worked in a circus all his life for nothing. He was as handy with a paint brush as he was with horses and men.

Within fifteen minutes he had completed a sign. A sign of such gargantuan proportions that it cost him and Joyce no end of labor to string it from the Owl Drug Store across to the First National Bank.

The long procession of cars coming back from Greasewood Junction slowed up to read Art's sign, which said:

STOP!
Your Friends Are All O. K.
Because They Were Lucky Enough to Find a Hospital
Here in Pima City
This Hospital Is Supported by
Pima City's Mid-Winter Punchers' Parada
HOMER YOUNG AND HIS GANG
WILL BE HERE
TO-MORROW AT 1:30 SHARP
What About You?
Comfortable Grand Stands Perfectly SAFE

Well, there were cars, of course, that didn't stop. But the appeal was by far too direct to escape the great majority of them.

Judging by the crowds that milled up and down Main Street that night, the next day promised to be a record breaker at the fair grounds.

Art and Joyce fell in with the holiday throngs which were heading for the dance hall. It was open, above, to the soft desert night. Millions of tiny, twinkling stars crowded low over a cowpoke orchestra with fiddles and an accordion. Just outside the door, Art put a restraining hand on Joyce's arm.

"Let's—um—er," he began. "Let's—" He flushed crimson, and then blurted out: "Let's dance."

Joyce regarded him amusedly a moment.

"Is—is that what you started to ask me?"

He managed to grin this time.

"Bless your heart, no. I started to ask you if you'd changed your mind about travelin' with a circus, next year. An' then, instead, I changed mine."

Joyce caught her breath.

"But, Art—"

He thrilled at the alarm in her voice.

"I changed my mind about travelin' with a circus, that is. Decided there'd be enough fun runnin' this here shebang at Pima City once a year. An' that in between times I'd better settle down before I got any older an' start raisin' little calves an' colts, an'—"

Joyce cut him off.

"It's all the same to me, Art," she said gently, "travelin' with a show or—ranchin'. Jest so's I'm teamed up with you."

And her lips were ready, just where they should have been, when he bent over to kiss her.

Knights of the Saddle Leather

By Clee Woods

From across the range two knights came riding up to the ranch house gate. True love they offered the girl of their dreams and courageously she made her choice.

THE moment Ellen Ritchie first heard the loud voice through the door, she disliked it. She hated the thoughts of the whole thing anyway.

"Yes, I'm Bob Wirt all right," she heard the unpleasant voice telling her invalid mother in the living room of the rambling 'dobe ranch house. "I sure was bashful about comin' here, too, under the circumstances."

As she hesitated outside the door, Ellen's pretty white teeth bit at an equally pretty lower lip. Those "circumstances" the newcomer mentioned had destroyed her usual tranquil existence long before this moment. Now, listening to the confident voice beyond the door, the auburn-haired ranch girl grew angry and rebellious. Without opening the door, she tiptoed back to her room and flung her tall, slender form down across the bed.

"I wouldn't do it," she vowed to herself, "not for a dozen Circle W Ranches. No, I won't, no matter what happens to me and—"

There she stopped. She had her mother to think of. And she did love the old Circle W Ranch dearly. Her father had been its foreman for twenty years, before his death several years before.

At remembrance of her duty to her mother, a baffled look came into her soft, long-lashed brown eyes. If she left the Circle W, where would she take her half-paralyzed mother? And how would she provide food and shelter for them both and pay the doctors her mother had to have?

The source of this distress lay in the will of the lately deceased Billy Wirt. He had been her uncle by marriage. But in effect Ellen Ritchie had been a beloved daughter to the childless and widowed old rancher.

And, like a foolish, too-doting par-

ent, he had sought to throw about her the strongest safeguard he knew for her future happiness. But he had chosen a mighty queer way of doing it. For his will provided that Ellen Ritchie was to have half the Circle W Ranch only in the event that she married his blood nephew, Bob Wirt. The young people had a year in which to decide. If either refused to agree to the marriage, the ranch went to the other.

Ellen had never seen this Bob Wirt. For he had been brought up on a ranch in Texas, and had started early on his cowboy wanderings. The last four years he had spent, though, in trying vainly to get a small herd going in southeastern Nevada. But within the past year even his fond old uncle had been forced to admit that Bob, at twenty-eight, was broke flat.

"But, Ellen," the girl could hear her Uncle Billy telling her those many, many times, "Bob is the finest boy that ever stepped across a horse. Clean, honest, afraid o' nothin'."

Uncle Billy had journeyed to see Bob Wirt twice while he was too busy failing on the Nevada ranch to visit his uncle at the Circle W. Ellen had trusted Uncle Billy's judgment, even of this nephew. But the trouble was that she had not considered marrying anybody, ever. When the will of her old protector had been opened and read three weeks back, she had sat stupefied. First, that anything had been left to her at all. Then, that to get it she had to marry a man she had never seen.

"No," she vowed anew to herself, "I'll take Mother to a dirt hogan first. I'll—"

There she stopped again. A new thought had come to her. For a moment she sat up rigid on the edge of the bed. Yes, she could do it. And she would!

She had suddenly remembered that the will provided that if either beneficiary refused to agree to the marriage at the end of a year, the entire ranch went to the other. Now Ellen Ritchie had decided to make this Bob Wirt willing to lose all his inheritance to be rid of her.

"But," she added to herself, not even now forgetting her strong sense of fairness, "I'll make up his loss to him, after I've got the Circle W, by paying him the money value of his half, just as quick as I can make the ranch earn it."

Out to the living room she strode, assuming a mannish swagger, not at all becoming to her feminine self. The unwelcome heir arose quickly at her entrance, and bowed awkwardly as Mrs. Ritchie muttered an introduction.

Ellen was more displeased with her proposed husband than ever. He was large and heavy built. In his full face could be read uncontrolled egotism and deep-seated cunning.

"Ellen, I am delighted beyond words," he murmured, in what was a hard effort to appear chivalrous.

"Miss Ritchie, if you please, Mr. Wirt," Ellen returned frigidly.

His very light gray eyes opened just a bit at that setback. Ellen's own mother stared at her as if she did not recognize her usual easy-going, carefree daughter.

"Oh," he assured her, recovering, "we'll soon be callin' each other pet names. And," he added, devouring her beautiful face with his eyes, "I don't care how soon you know I want to clinch my share of this ranch Uncle Billy left me—on his terms!"

Ellen felt that she could have slapped him in the face then, for his brazen effrontery about the matter.

"I've been managing the ranch," Ellen told him, changing the subject as much as she could, "during Uncle Billy's long sickness and then since his death a month ago. *I'm going to keep on running it, too, until the estate is settled permanently.*"

Those last words came out cold and evenly measured. Wirt's reddish face clouded slightly, in spite of himself. Mrs. Ritchie started perceptibly.

"Of late," Ellen went on, "the ranch

has had trouble with Mexican bandits from across the Border. If you want, you can undertake to stop them from driving off our beef. I'll attend to all the other affairs of the ranch."

To this the man made no reply. But Ellen could see that the overbearing, self-assertive heir was making up his own mind about that arrangement.

"Of course," she asserted quite uncompromisingly, "you will show both Mother and me the courtesy of staying at the bunkhouse with the cowboys, instead of taking a room here in the big house."

With little more ado, Wirt left the house and sought the bunkhouse to which he had been assigned so arbitrarily. But Ellen saw that he was boiling inside with rage. Not long, she knew, could she dominate the situation without some sort of a showdown.

For a week matters dragged along. Wirt was in Border City most of the time, attending to the legal phases of his new inheritance that needed immediate attention. Even so, however, his domineering, arrogant nature had begun to assert itself.

Early one afternoon she was just coming from the night pasture with "Turk," her pet horse, when she spied a stranger dismounting at the horse corral. Wirt was there by the corral. Ellen's saddle was with others across the corral fence, so she kept leading Turk on until she passed close by the stranger. He turned from the conversation begun with Wirt, and bared a mass of wavy, coal-black hair in doffing his big gray sombrero.

In that first moment, Ellen Ritchie knew he was such a man as she had never seen before. Although he could not have been more than thirty at the most, his bronzed, bone-lined face seemed to have the depth of years behind its pleasant, quiet exterior. There was a fresh scar up alongside his right cheekbone. And in the recesses of his deep blue eyes there lurked a certain grimness of purpose. His shoulders might have been fashioned after Hercules, and yet from them his body wedged downward to narrow hips and long legs slightly bowed by years in the saddle.

Some might have thought his mouth and nose slightly too large to call him handsome. But Ellen saw only the vivid reflection of a strong man in that range-stamped face. She saw, too, the virile, vibrating life and mighty force in his magnificent frame; and sensed the quiet, powerful mastery radiating from his whole rugged being. The six-gun on his right hip seemed a part of him.

Never in her twenty-two years had the ranch girl bothered her head about men. There was nothing fickle nor transient about her. Yet now something primitive and wild, yes, even terrorizing, seemed to flash up in her and whisper, "This is your man!"

"My name's Bob Living," she heard his deep, resonant voice telling her, "and I was just fixin' to ask yore pard here for a job."

He nodded toward Wirt. But his eyes still held on her slender face, now more lovely than ever under the slight crimson that had come to mingle with the light tan on her healthy cheeks.

"And I," Wirt put in, "can tell you right off, hombre, that the Circle W don't need no more hands. It just needs better management of the ones it has," he added cryptically.

As if from a dream, Ellen came back at that declaration. But she gave no direct intimation that she had heard it.

"Your horse looks gaunted," she said simply. "Turn him out and take it easy about the bunkhouse till the cowboys come in. Bill Sampler is temporary wagon boss. Tell him I hired you."

With that, the girl dropped her bridle reins and reached for her saddle on the corral fence.

"I say you're not hired," Wirt laid down measuredly. "And I don't want to see you hangin' around here like you thought you was, neither."

Wirt squared himself off and let his right hand rest close to the butt of his

six-gun. But the stranger gave no outward indication that might have told he remembered he too had a gun. Instead, he glanced over at Ellen, just as to say, "I believe you had caught your horse to go some place." Taking the hint, she turned to the saddling of her mount.

But Living stepped over, threw on her saddle and cinched it up not at all hurriedly. Wirt glared at them and retained his defiant attitude. Ellen swung to the saddle and rode away.

She could not refrain from glancing back over her shoulder. The first time she looked she saw the two men standing face to face again, ten feet apart, like two fierce animals watching each other. When she was nearly out of sight she looked again.

Now Bob Living was taking a slow step toward Wirt. Fascinated, Ellen stopped her horse. Twice more Living moved his small cowboy feet toward the other man. Wirt took a backward step and called out a vicious warning. Living pressed him farther back.

Finally, Living crowded the other against the corral fence, reached out and took his gun and hurled it into the corral. Then he turned off toward the bunkhouse, without so much as glancing in Ellen's direction.

Ellen directed Turk out into the rolling, loma-dotted country beyond the little canyon that sheltered the Circle W headquarters somewhat from the beat of the desert sun. South of her was the vast stretch of the desert's arm. Into this she rode. For she wanted to think, to get this whirl out of her head. And the queer little choke out of her throat.

It was getting dark when she came riding back within half a mile of home. The great yellow ball of the desert moon was raising its irregular shape above the saw-tooth rim of mountains to the east. Like scrimmage lines of feathered savage heads showing along the western horizon, the yuccas now stood out in the last tints of the lost sun.

Suddenly Turk stopped, blowing through his nostrils. Then from the shadows Wirt came riding toward her.

"I've been waitin' for you," he announced. "Get off and set down here. We've got to come to an understandin'."

There was a deep menace in his voice. Yet Ellen knew she dared not refuse. For to do so would have shown the fear she had begun to feel for the man. She was determined not only to conceal that fear, but to conquer it. She therefore slid from the saddle.

"Things are pretty clearly laid down now," she said.

Wirt did not offer to seat her, though. Instead, he planted himself before her in a determined way.

"Listen, little spitfire," he began harshly, "whoever heard of a crazy young slip of a girl runnin' a ranch, anyhow? From now on I'm boss, see?"

"I wish you would first try bossin' that ugly temper of yours," Ellen mocked him lightly. "Then you had better try your hand on getting rid of the Border bandits, before you call for a new deal."

"I'm not callin' for a new deal, I'm takin' it," Wirt flared back. "And what's more, I'm goin' to marry you before that year is up! I'm goin' to make you so crazy over me you'll be eatin' out of my hand!"

"Oh," Ellen chuckled in cold amusement, "are you turning caveman all at once? Let me give you some more advice on the matter. Caveman stunts work only on the weak sisters, with bone spavin in the brain. They're the only kind you blowhards can bully into believing they love you."

"Is that so?" Wirt fairly bellowed.

He leaped forward and seized her by the shoulders. His grip sank cruelly into her flesh. She tried to tear loose. But he held her fast and began shaking her in vicious rage.

"You wanted to know about my caveman notions, eh?" he cried.

All at once he released her shoulders and shot one arm on down about her.

Despite her frantic struggles he got the side of his face down against her forehead and began forcing her head back, to get his lips to hers.

But just when the struggling girl realized she could not escape the crazed embrace, Bob Living sped out of the darkness. Wirt flung her away and whirled to meet him, his right hand going for his gun. The next instant, though, Living crashed a fist into the other man's chin. Wirt went crumpling down and then lay huddled in the grama grass, unconscious.

"I saw him slip away," Living told her, "and I knew he was comin' to make trouble for yuh. So I followed him. But I lost him in the dark and didn't get him located again till yore voices came to me."

Ellen was trembling all over. More, though, from the knowledge of her helplessness than from fear. Helpless in the grip of a man like Wirt. And now helpless, too, she half feared, against something, she hardly knew what.

For Bob Living had taken hold of her hand and drawn her arm through his. Running Turk's reins over his other arm, he started leading her on toward the house.

Only an occasional word passed between them, as they strolled along that moonlight trail. At the corral Living unsaddled Turk, spread the blankets on the fence beside the saddle, and then came on toward the house with her.

"Do yuh know, Ellen," he said, suddenly seizing her hands again by the gate, "that the Circle W is a mighty fine ranch—big, well stocked, fine located, a great layout?"

"I have always loved it," Ellen declared.

"But yuh're goin' to lose it," Living suddenly asserted. "Because, Ellen, yuh're goin' to decide to marry me. And I'm only a empty-pocketed cowpoke, without a job. Yuh're too all unstrung to talk about it now, but yuh will give up the Circle W for me!"

Even as he was finishing the bold declaration, he dropped her hands and turned back, as if regretful that he had taken advantage of her distraught condition to say as much as he had. Ellen stood staring after his broad back, both speechless and immobile for the moment. Then, when his spurs had clinked out of hearing, she slowly brought first one hand and then the other to her lips.

"Yes, I will," she whispered softly, with her head thrown back to that entrancing moon.

She went into her room and sat down by the window. What a night! What a man!

For a long time she sat there, dreaming moon dreams, and shedding a few unexplained and unnatural tears.

Then there came to her ears the crunch of booted feet down the way. Next, low, hard voices. She raised half up, head thrust farther out through the deep window in the 'dobe wall. It was Living and Wirt again!

"—and clearin' out for good," Wirt was finishing up a sentence.

"Turn around," came Living's low order, "and march away. "Yuh're goin' to stay right here and go through with this. That's it, move along and—"

His voice trailed off into the night. The sound of their feet died away. Ellen sat in deeper wonderment. Had Wirt been coming to tell her he was going to leave? And what did Living mean when he told Wirt he must stay there and go through with it? Go through with what?

She was to have an explanation the next morning. While she was at an early breakfast, Wirt came stealing in through the back door. Now he was all contrition.

"Miss Ritchie," he began, "I saw you at the window last night when Living turned me back. You must have heard a little of what was said. Anyway, I've got to own up to a plot that I'm ashamed of now. But the truth is, I hired this Living to come here."

"Hired him?" Ellen echoed, puzzled.

"Yes, and I'm sick of my bargain. That's because, Ellen, I've turned to lovin' you all at once. When I first came here, though, it was with the notion I didn't want no unseen woman for a wife. But I did like the idea of ownin' the whole Circle W. So I hired Living to come along and make love to you. When he showed up, I pretended not to want him, knowin' you would overrule me. He only pretended to knock me out last night. He was to get you crazy about him, so you would refuse to marry me, and so give me the ranch."

Wirt paused, to let the full force of that statement sink in. Ellen Ritchie was pale as death. Into her eyes there stole the look of a wounded wild creature.

"But," Wirt was adding, as if he did not see the suffering in the girl's face, "I'm tellin' you this now to stop it before any harm is done. Now I'm goin' to give Living just ten minutes to get off this ranch."

Wirt started for the door. Slowly Ellen got up and followed him. The dimple in the right cheek of her slender face had become part of a drawn line. The suffering in her eyes was becoming subdued by some grim resolution.

"No," she vetoed Wirt's last declaration, "you let Living alone. I'll attend to him."

Making love to her for pay! She passed her hand over her eyes, as if she would shut out the sight even of the man who had brought her the story of such shame. Wirt was disappearing out the door.

"Send Bill Sampler here," she called after him.

Within a few minutes Bill Sampler, the gruff old temporary wagon boss, came in response to her summons.

"Bill," the girl ordered, "go get our three nerviest men, and meet me out at the horse corral. Bring Bob Living along, too. When I step up to Living and—and smile into his face, you and the boys throw your guns on him. After that, do as I say."

Bill Sampler stood with mouth agape. But he knew Ellen Ritchie was not given to brainstorms, nor to changing her mind often either. With a muttered "Yes'm," he shuffled out.

Ellen went to her room and buckled on a thirty-eight Colt special. The hurt look swept back into her eyes for just a fraction of time as she remembered that she had donned her gayest cowgirl garb that morning. This consisted of a boyish flannel shirt of blue checks, light gray whipcord breeches and tanned boots with red hearts at the tops. All because she was going to see Bob Living again. Now—well, she was going to see him all right!

Out to the corral she went. Living was close behind Bill Sampler and three cowboys coming across to the corral. Ellen passed the Circle W men and then stopped Living so that his back was to the quartet.

"It's a great day," she said, smiling up into his face.

"I shore do think it is and—"

Living cut short his happy remark. Slowly he turned his head from side to side, to look back over his shoulders. Four six-guns were pointing into his back. Now Ellen's thirty-eight joined the others in aiming at him. The smile on her face had changed to a look of grim death itself almost.

"Put those hands up!" she ordered, fighting back the tremor from her voice.

"Why, Miss Ellen," Living exclaimed, "what's all this about?"

"Mainly," she told him, "because you're not wanted here."

Living started to say something, then caught himself. His hands went up. One of the men took his gun.

"One of the reasons," Ellen then continued, "that you're not wanted here is that you and Mr. Wirt don't get along very well together. That," she added, her voice growing hard, "will never do—for I am going to marry Mr. Wirt soon!"

"What's that?" Living suddenly cried, leaping forward and clutching

her by the shoulders. "Ellen, yuh—"

This time Living's words were checked by a clubbed gun that one of the Circle W men whacked down on his head. The cowboy had mistaken Living's quick move for a trick to get her between himself and them. The hasty blow landed squarely and heavily, as Living was too preoccupied with the girl before him to see it coming. He slumped to the ground and lay there, one hand clutching feebly at Ellen's tiny boot toe.

"Saddle pack a horse and strap him across it," Ellen commanded the visibly disturbed men.

While they obeyed her orders, she roped a good horse from those that had just been corralled for the day's activities, and saddled him.

By the time the men had Living securely strapped across the saddle, head down, he was coming to. Even before his head had cleared, he began trying to call out something to Ellen.

"Put a gag in his mouth," she told Bill Sampler. "I never want—I don't want to be bothered by his lies and begging."

She had started to say, "I never want to hear his money-made lies of love again!" But, sparing herself, she had changed it to words that could have meant anything less personal and humiliating than the actuality. The wound the revelation had brought was burning deep and bitter in the young woman's sensitive soul.

And there was another reason for the gag. Ellen Ritchie actually feared to let this man have his tongue on the long trek she intended. Feared that in spite of herself he might convince her he was not so despicable as she believed him to be. And she was determined now to remember him as the most despised of all humans she ever knew.

Living fought frantically against the gag. A man held his head, though, while Bill Sampler forced a neckerchief into his mouth, placed another over it, and bound them there as amply secure as the captive was rawhided across the saddle. In accordance with further orders, another man brought the girl two large canteens of water, and the fourth ran a tow rope to the bridle bit of Living's horse.

Thus prepared, Ellen went leading her captive away. When Bill Sampler insisted on going with her, she turned him back with a severity no Circle W rider had ever seen in her before. There were three immediate ways she might have taken to strike the main trail to the south, across the desert's arm. But she deliberately invited the irony of the situation by leading her captive back over the same way they had come only the night before, arm in arm.

All that morning she crowded the two horses out across the seared country. Never a word did she utter to her captive. She cached one canteen of water and let the horses drink the last water of the other, from her cream-colored Stetson. By noon they were approaching the Mexican border, nearly thirty miles from the Circle W.

All unknown to her, the man Wirt had been dogging her trail, keeping back behind the crests of hills and ridges. And unknown even to him, four Mexican outlaws and a renegade white man stood behind the trunks of giant suhuaros on a hilltop ahead, and watched the girl tow her captive toward them.

"What do you make of it?" one of the Mexicans whispered in his native tongue, to the white man.

"It is Ellen Ritchie," answered the hard-faced renegade, who was leader of the outlaws. "That is the way old Billy Wirt brought me across the Border, eight years ago. I know it would be what he said, death to be caught back on his range. But now what a sweet revenge! She will be alone when she turns that prisoner loose! No, look! Yonder comes a man following her. But he means no more good than I do."

Ellen Ritchie pulled her horse to a halt down where the trail dipped into an open arroyo. Taking a small knife from her pocket, she slashed some of

the rawhide that held her captive on the horse.

"This," she told him, "is the way Uncle Billy used to get rid of undesirable characters, such as horse thieves and the like, when he couldn't get absolute proof on them or when he felt too sorry for some wretch to swing him. Across the Border six miles on this trail is a water hole. That's the only place you can get to water afoot, for the nearest water on this side of the Border is at the Circle W."

With that, she finished slashing the rawhides that bound him, allowed him to drop unceremoniously to the ground, and jerked her horses back toward home. She had seen that he began tearing frantically at the rawhide gag which still encircled his head tightly. And then from behind her there came his queer gurgling sounds. These changed to almost ridiculous bawling, as a hundred yards behind her the man got the gag out and found that his jaws were too set and his mouth too dry and cracked for coherent words. When he came running after her, she whipped ahead the pack horse from which she had taken the bridle, and sent her mount galloping after it. Soon she raced on over a ridge out of sight.

Seeing that he could never overtake the determined girl, Living stopped. The water hole across the Border now had to be his first objective. After that, he must hurry back, before the rash girl carried out her mad vow to marry the other man. Still he did not dream of the presence of that other man near him.

But on the ridge just across from him his arch enemy was crawling up behind a rock, with a Winchester in his hand. He would make sure of this thing himself this time, the fellow vowed to himself. He was thinking of that fresh scar on the face of the man the girl had just turned loose. "Yes, damn him," he gritted under his breath, "you'll be dead instead of 'Living' when this gun cracks this time."

Here indeed was a strange drama unfolding. For this man with the rifle was not Bob Wirt at all. His right name was Anse Creel. He was a rank impostor who had schemed cleverly to gain possession of the Circle W, and its other half owner too. But the strangest part of the twisted happenings was that the cowboy down there in the trail below Creel's rifle was the real Bob Wirt. He had given the name of "Living" because he was lucky to be living now instead of dead.

To understand all this, it is necessary to go back to a little hotel on Wirt's way from Nevada. Through the frail wall between two rooms of the hostelry, this Anse Creel had heard the real Bob Wirt telling a friend, whom he had met accidentally, of his strange inheritance. How, to get half of the Circle W Ranch, he had to marry a girl whom he had never seen. Also, how he would rather have the girl herself than a dozen such ranches, if he only could win her love.

Shortly before this Creel had got only a glimpse of the deep-voiced man's back in the unlighted lobby below. When he had gained all the information he could through the wall, Creel crept out and hired a cold cash killer to watch the hotel, follow the man with the deep voice and shoot him from ambush. In order to have an alibi, then, in case complications ever came up, Creel had ridden on to the next town four miles ahead. The killer reported to him secretly there the next day, saying he had put a bullet through the head of the real Bob Wirt.

Thus Anse Creel had completed the long journey to the Circle W, under the belief that nothing stood in the way of his claiming Bob Wirt's inheritance. He knew he was of the same general size as Wirt, and that nobody at the Circle W had ever seen the rightful heir.

But the killer's bullet had only dug a dangerous furrow alongside Bob Wirt's head, although it knocked him unconscious from his horse. Within a few days he had been able to come on

to the Circle W. It had suited the real Wirt's purposes to let the pretender go on playing off as Bob Wirt.

That was how it happened, after Anse Creel grew suspicious of Wirt's deep voice, Wirt had told him out there before the Circle W ranch house that first night, that he had to stay there and go through with the thing. This had given Creel the opportunity for the despicable lie he had told the girl about his hiring Bob Living to make love to her.

And now, with Wirt coming under his bead, this Anse Creel was glad that the real Bob Wirt had chosen to keep his identity a secret. Now he could put him out of the way without its ever being known.

"I'll be Bob Wirt yet," he told himself, as he thumbed back the rifle hammer, "and boss of the Circle W. Boss of that little spitfire critter too, for she'll come around before she'll lose half this ranch."

Slowly he lined his sights on the figure of the man whose name and place he had taken the past week. His finger closed on the trigger. Then he let up for a moment. His hand was shaking. Again he lowered his cheek to the rifle stock.

ELLEN RITCHIE had not gone half a mile before she heard the cry of a rifle behind her. In spite of the desert heat, her blood ran cold.

Four men leaped up from hiding on the hilltop overlooking the trail where she had left her banished captive. They rushed back toward where she knew they must have horses hid. Their actions did not indicate flight. That one shot told her plainer than words that they thought they had got their man.

It would have been useless for her to have attempted driving her wearied horse ahead of their fresh mounts for long. But she was not thinking of her own safety. For suddenly her love for Bob Wirt, whom she still believed to be Bob Living, leaped up far mightier than the remembrance of the humiliation Creel's story had brought upon her. She had carried him into this peril, and she would go back to him. Save him if she could. Or die with him.

She sent her horse flying back along the trail over which she had just come. In a moment, though, she caught sight of four Border outlaws galloping toward her. Seeing that they were directly in her path, she whirled back north again.

The moment, however, she got over a little rise of ground, she cut around again, trying to get back to where she had left the real Bob Wirt. But the quartet guessed her intention before she got too far. Two men cut across to head her off, while the other two came swinging up from behind her.

Believing they would try to capture instead of shooting her, Ellen tried to ride past the pair in front. The white man threw out a loop and spurred up beside her. She ducked low to avoid the throw. But he looped her horse instead of her. As her mount nearly upended and came to a stop, Ellen leaped off and sprang over beside a big hump of rock that combed up out of the sloping hillside. Here she flashed up her gun. The two men close to her came to an abrupt halt, while the others rushed up.

"Ye might as well give in," the white outlaw told her, "for we've got ye anyhow."

The quartet, now dismounted and in a semicircle about the rock up against which she had backed, began to discuss how best to capture her without grief to themselves. Minutes dragged by and still they did not crowd closer nor hit on any feasible plan of capturing her without facing the menace of her thirty-eight.

"Before we go any further," said one of the Mexicans in Spanish, which Ellen understood, "hadn't we better go see if Pete has disposed of the man she turned loose?"

"He didn't have any guns," declared the white man, also in Spanish. "Pete will handle him all right. I told him

above all else not to let the fellow get a gun from the dead man."

"And it will only let us get him quicker," put in a second, "if he does avoid Pete's bullets and work over this way, trying to help the woman."

Ellen could have shouted aloud for joy. This conversation told her that Bob had not been killed. They had left the unarmed and unmounted Bob to a fifth man, while rushing after her to get her before she escaped. But who was the dead man they spoke of? They seemed certain somebody had been killed.

As long as no further shots came from across the way she could assume that Bob was safe.

And she knew that he was the kind of man who would do something about his predicament in a hurry. That heartened her in keeping these four men close about her. She even led them to believe that every moment she was getting nearer the point of giving up without using the gun they wisely had been respecting.

"Come on, throw that gun down and surrender," the white man urged in deceptive argument. "I'll see no harm comes to ye, Miss Ritchie. I jist want to take ye prisoner and hold ye for, say, a thousand dollars or two ransom."

Ellen did not comply with the demand, but she feigned more and more nervous uncontrol. The men kept easing closer, the white man all the while repeating his lying assurances.

Just when she was wondering what she should do next, Ellen saw a big hand and arm flash up out of a small dry wash across behind the men. On the wrist of the upraised member there were the imprints of rawhide. Without seeing that, Ellen knew the hand was Bob's. It was beckoning to her. She could not make out its meaning at first. Then Bob's face showed and his lips moved to form the words, "Your gun."

Instantly, then, Ellen understood. "Well," she cried to the white outlaw, as if in capitulation, "if I throw away my gun, will you protect me?"

"Of course," came the false assurance.

"All right, here it is," she cried, in mock hysteria.

She pretended to fling the gun at the men. But it went sailing far off to one side and high above their heads. Ellen broke to run, as if in sudden terror. The men all surged after her, without turning to see where the gun had landed.

The weapon did not quite reach Bob's dry wash. But he was leaping out to meet it. Just then one of the men, catching a glimpse of Bob, cried out the warning. All the outlaws whirled, going for their guns in disregard of Bob's shout for their surrender.

Then the thirty-eight barked out quickly, again and again. Bob Wirt was hunched down low. Frozen in Ellen's memory then was the look on the cowboy's taut, twisted face as his left hand fanned swiftly over the gun hammer. There was grim fight there, cool judgment and pained regret at the necessity of it, all occurring at the same moment.

The outlaw forty-fives began roaring too. But Wirt's first shot had dropped the white leader dead, he being by far the most dangerous in such a battle. A Mexican reeled. Ellen sprang forward and beat her hat at another Mexican gun, to destroy its aim. A bullet from the weapon numbed two of her fingers as it burnt through between them and tugged through the hat.

The owner of the gun dropped it and threw up his hands. A second stood with hands up and blood dripping from a sleeve. The third Mexican lay on the ground, wounded. Bob had won the unequal gun battle. As soon as he had disarmed the surrendering ones, he left them under guns in the plucky girl's hands, and hurried to meet the fifth man, whom he knew would be rushing to the scene.

Wirt had eluded this man earlier by making the fellow believe he was going to try to work up the ridge.

Now when he met the fifth outlaw as he expected, it was easy to force the lone Mexican to surrender.

After the prisoners had been secured and Ellen had compelled Bob to allow her to dress a bad rake a bullet had made across his back, he caught the outlaw horses and asked her to ride over the ridge with him. On the crest of the ridge, stretched down behind a rock that overlooked the trail below, lay the still figure of Anse Creel. A bullet fired from the hilltop above had entered his back and penetrated his heart. The man's rifle was still at his shoulder and it pointed down on the trail.

"His gun," the cowboy told her, "is pointin' down where I stood when the rifle cracked. The hammer is back, showin' he was takin' a bead on me at the time the outlaws got him. More'n likely they killed him because he had guns and stood in the way of them gettin' you. If he had killed me, he could have been sure the blame would have been placed on the outlaws. They turned the tables just a bit."

"But," Ellen puzzled, "he told me that you and he were partners. Or at least that he hired you to come and—and—keep me from marrying him. As if he would have had to trick me out of the notion."

The cowboy was staring at her now in half understanding. Ellen's face went crimson under his accusing gaze.

"And you believed," he charged, "that I was makin' love to yuh for pay! Now I see why yuh was riddin' the range of me in such an uncomfortable way, and vowin' yuh'd marry that crooked hombre for spite."

"I didn't say I was doing it for spite," Ellen defended meekly.

"But that was it. Or more exactly, because yuh loved me, yuh little strong-headed critter, in spite of yore belief I was a hired Romeo."

Quickly then, as they rode away, he told her the story of his attempted killing and of Creel's impersonation of him.

"Yuh shore gave me a scare," he finished, "when yuh went lopin' off back home to marry that supposed-to-be partner of your'n, and me not able to get this mouth of mine to operatin' at all.

"Yuh see, Ellen, I have been crazy about yuh for several years, Uncle Billy havin' shown me yore picture. I came here with my mind set on winnin' yuh, and I wanted yuh to love me hard enough to be willin' to give up the Circle W for me. So that's why I played off as Bob Living while the other hombre was abusin' my rightful name."

Suddenly he spurred his horse up close beside hers, reached out and swept her across onto the saddle before him.

"Ellen," he laughed down at her helplessness in his mighty arms, "my mouth will never be right from that terrible gag yuh silenced me with, till—till—yuh kiss me!"

Tears were welling out of Ellen's lustrous brown eyes. But she laughed through them and said, "Bob, dear, I'm perfectly willing to make it right!"

Crooks of the Clawhammer

A ROMANCE OF THE WEST IN SIX PARTS

By Frank C. Robertson

PART FOUR

ED BOYCE had been in charge of the big Clawhammer outfit for a week, and the stealing of pure-bred horses that had completely discouraged the former owner, was going on at the same alarming rate.

Before, the horse ranch had been managed by Brigham Highhouse, and he had been supplanted by Boyce, at the order of the trust company which had taken over the failing ranch.

It wasn't long before Boyce decided that the thief was young Roy Bidwell, brother of Hank and Quall Bidwell of the Clawhammer spread. The foreman made an accusation to the two brothers and sent them away from the ranch.

Shortly after this, Boyce met a beautiful girl, a waitress in the nearby town of Daggett, to whom he was greatly attracted. He found out that she was Ina Bidwell, sister of the Bidwell brothers, and she told him that she knew that he was trying to send her young brother to the penitentiary for horse stealing. She claimed that the boy was innocent.

After that Ace Highhouse, son of Brig Highhouse, the ousted manager, offered to help Ina save her brother, but his price for this was marriage to himself. Ina did not like him, and knew the Highhouses were behind the rustling on the Clawhammer, but she gave her promise to him, and from then on the lawless activities of the renegades broke out in full force.

Boyce's sister, Ellen, arrived at the ranch while Boyce was held captive by the gang. Ina befriended the girl in her loneliness and told her some of the truth about Boyce's capture. She did not give up her determination to save her brother, Roy. She was torn between loyalty to him, and her friendship for Ellen.

The foreman escaped from the outlaws, and came home more angry than ever with the Bidwells. He forbid Ina the ranch.

Ina's position was further complicated by her overhearing that the outlaws intended to capture Ellen and hold her safety over Boyce's head. Narrowly escaping death after listening to their talk on the rangeland, she left a note at the Clawhammer, while Boyce was away on round-up, telling Ellen to meet her, and Ellen started off. Just then her brother returned to find her missing.

CHAPTER XIII

Circumstantial Evidence

INA had spent a sleepless night after her close call with the outlaws on the ridge above the Clawhammer. The shock of those bullets hissing about her had been enough to keep her nerves tingling for a long time to come, but her concern over the things she had overheard affected her even more.

She had still not solved the problem when Sheriff Colton arrived the next morning to see if Hank or Quall had got home. As he announced his intention of riding over to the Clawhammer, she was inspired to write the note which Ed Boyce was later to find on his sister's bed.

At three o'clock that afternoon both girls were at the appointed meeting place. Ina had reached the spot first, and when the car stopped she walked eagerly up to it.

"Hello, dear," Ellen greeted. "You see I'm on time."

"I'm certainly glad you are," Ina said with relief. "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"Why, of course I'd come; even if it was just a simple request. But if it's as serious as your note implied, you should have come to the ranch no matter what my brother said."

"I'll never do that," Ina said grimly. "Not unless he takes back a lot he's said."

"I'm glad you leave a way open for a diplomatic exchange," Ellen smiled. "But what is the trouble you mentioned?"

"You're in great danger. You mustn't stay at the ranch alone any more."

"But what is the danger?"

"The danger is that some dark night a bunch of tough characters will ride up to the ranch, and you won't be there no more," Ina said succinctly. Her voice carried conviction, and a cold shudder ran over the other girl.

"How do you know that?" Ellen asked, a little tremulously.

"I heard some men talking. I know they meant what they said."

"But who were they?"

This was a question which Ina had been expecting, and she had previously made up her mind not to answer. She had no proof, and though Ellen might believe her, nobody else would, and it would almost certainly get her, and probably others, into trouble.

"I can't tell you that," she said.

"Not friends of yours, surely?"

"Not hardly." A bitter little smile curved Ina's lips.

"Were they by any chance these Highhouses?" Ellen pressed. Boyce had told her something of his suspicion concerning that family group.

"I wouldn't tell you if it was them," Ina said shortly. "But it happens that it wasn't. I think they were outlaws from Plummer's Hole."

"I see. You are certain that they have—designs upon me?"

"They said they wanted to kidnap you so that they could make your brother do what they wanted."

"If they don't get me what will they do to—to my brother?"

"I don't know, except that the leader said he mustn't be killed—that he wouldn't be of any use to them dead."

"Thank God for that," Ellen breathed. She no longer treated the other girl's warning lightly. She had the good sense to realize that she and Ed both stood in dire peril. "But there are situations I can imagine where Ed

would sooner face death than the kind of surrender they might demand," she added.

Ina nodded solemnly. "He's that kind," she testified. She knew without pausing to think about it that Ed Boyce was the kind of man who would face death without a whimper rather than accept dishonor. He was a real man—she recognized that fact with characteristic honesty, despite the trouble she had had with him; but for some strange reason the thought embittered her. She would have liked it better if he had been less forceful in his ways.

"I'm afraid for Ed," Ellen said in a low voice. "That is the reason I insisted upon staying at the ranch. I wanted to share his danger. But now —now I'm afraid that I'm only increasing it."

"That's just it," Ina said eagerly. "I was afraid you wouldn't see it."

"I've been thinking of it for some time, and had about concluded that it was selfish of me. Ed works hard all day, and then has to spend half the night riding home because of me. I see it isn't fair. But, oh, Ina, it breaks my heart not to be able to share his danger."

There were sympathetic tears in Ina's eyes, but it would not do to show too much feeling, lest she defeat her own purpose.

"What can I do?" Ellen worried.

"Go to Daggett an' stay there till you can convince him that he'd better let somebody else buck these outlaws," Ina advised earnestly.

"I suppose that is best," Ellen admitted. "I'll go to-morrow."

"Don't wait till to-morrow—go to-night," Ina urged.

"But I must see Ed and explain things to him."

"Believe me, he'll feel a lot safer with you in Daggett."

"I suppose my stubbornness and selfishness has caused him a lot of anxiety and trouble," Ellen said ruefully. "But I hate to go away without seeing him."

"I didn't sleep a wink last night for fear that I'd be too late with my warning," Ina stated quietly.

"Only one thing could make me go, and that is if I thought Ed would be in more danger because of my being there—"

"He will be. If you're there when they come, you know what'll happen. If you're not there he'll have a much better chance to escape," Ina pointed out.

Ellen was quick to see the logic of Ina's argument, and she had another reason for going to Daggett that night. She could go to the sheriff and tell him, without mentioning names, what she had heard, and perhaps influence him to send a deputy out to the round-up to make sure that nothing happened to Ed.

First, however, she had to return home and write a full explanation of her actions to Ed, which she did. She urged Ina to accompany her to the ranch, but the range girl was adamant. She would not set foot upon the Clawhammer Ranch.

Back at the ranch Ellen wrote a letter, explaining to Ed that she had become convinced of her selfishness in causing him to have to ride so many miles after dark, so she was going to Daggett to remain until after the round-up was over. She said nothing of the warning she had received, feeling that it would only give him more cause to worry. She gave the note to Hung Fat with strict admonition to give it to Ed when he arrived.

Then Ina got into the car and drove to Daggett. She was nearly to town before she remembered that she had left Ina's note in her room, but she felt certain that Ed would not find it.

And all might have gone well had her movements not been observed by a man who skulked upon the top of the ridge which overlooked the buildings.

The man, Skelly, now that he was in hiding from the law because of his part in the abduction of Boyce, had nothing better to do than act as a spy for the

outlaws. It was just such a task as the fellow loved to do, and he still smarted from the humiliation he had endured when Ellen Boyce's eyes were upon him.

His degenerate mind would gladly have accepted any chance to injure the girl, but he was sensible enough not to attempt anything of the sort in daylight. With the aid of his glasses he made out that she was putting things into her car, and he rightly guessed that she was going to town. Had there been a chance to intercept her he would have done that, but in lieu of that he determined to wait until dusk concealed his approach and then go down and see what he could find at the ranch house.

He quickly ascertained that the ranch was abandoned by everybody but the Chinese cook. By peering in at a window Skelly saw that Hung Fat was preparing supper for one, and eating his own supper at the same time. With a cruel grin on his face, and a catlike tread, Skelly entered the front of the house, made his way through the dining room, and to the door of the kitchen. The cook's back was turned toward him.

"Stick 'em up!" he shouted shrilly.

A cup of tea had just reached the yellow man's lips, and the contents all went down at a single gulp. Hung Fat gasped and choked, but his hands went obediently above his head.

"Where's yore lady boss, Chinkee?" Skelly demanded.

"Lady boss glone to town," Hung Fat said. "Chinaman damn big fool he no go too."

"Where's Boyce? Will he be home to-night?"

"Yes, boss man he come home all time. Flaid bad man ketch-um young missee."

"Didn't the girl leave any word for him?" Skelly asked carelessly, but he caught the momentary look of fear in the cook's eyes.

"No leave word," Hung Fat denied hastily.

"She didn't, huh? Yo're a damn yaller liar. What did she say?"

"No say. Missee no talkee to China boy."

"Mebbe she didn't, but she musta give you a note or somethin'," Skelly declared, and again he surprised a telltale look upon the Chinaman's usually expressionless countenance.

"No leave anything," Hung Fat said dully.

"So you'll try tuh lie tuh me, will yuh, Chinkee?" Skelly purred. "I'll git the truth, an' have that note, or I'll have yore yellow hide. Are yuh gonna give it to me?"

"No gottee nothin' to glive," the Chinaman said monotonously.

There was a cruel gleam in Skelly's eyes. It was not often he found anyone whom he knew he could torture without fear of reprisal, and this opportunity was too good to be lost. Then, too, he was sure that the cook did have a note, and he meant to have it.

He forced the Chinaman to lie face downward upon the floor, and then he tied his hands together with strong twine that bit deeply into the yellow man's flesh. Rolling his victim over, Skelly made a search for a note, but without success. Hung Fat had it on his person, but it was concealed in a pocket in the tail of his blouse which no ordinary search would reveal.

"Listen, Chinkee. If you don't come across with that note I'll take you out on the range to a bunch who'll git it out of you if they have to peel yore hide off with a dull knife."

Hung Fat lapsed into a sullen silence. He made no pretension to bravery, but in the crisis his manhood rose supreme. He would not betray a trust. Skelly kicked and threatened in vain.

It was growing dark and the outlaw began to fear that Boyce might arrive, even though he knew that plans had been laid to prevent that very thing. But plans might go awry, and he had no desire to face Ed Boyce over

the sights of a gun. He wanted to get away, but he wanted some proof of his own heroism, so he decided to take the Chinese cook with him.

He forced Hung Fat to go outside, and, mounting his horse, he dropped his lasso rope over the helpless cook's neck and started away.

Hung Fat's hands were tied behind his back, so that whenever he faltered the rope tightened about his neck and cut off his breath. There was nothing he could do but follow along after the horse. Occasionally he stumbled and fell and would almost strangle before he could get to his feet, because his captor would not halt.

"Come or drag," Skelly would shout back unfeelingly. And Hung Fat, with torn feet and bruised, rope-burned neck would clamber to his feet and stagger on.

And so Ed Boyce found no note explaining his sister's absence and no cook to tell him what had become of her. The attack on him that night indicated a desire to capture rather than kill him.

If the outlaws already had Ellen in their hands, and could also capture him, they would have things entirely in their own hands. He began to see that the stakes the outlaws were playing for were bigger than he had imagined. His deductions were very nearly correct, for it had been determined to capture both him and Ellen that night.

Boyce was to be stopped on his way home, so that the girl could be taken from the ranch house with less difficulty. The rifle bullet that had killed his horse had been fired by Whitey Mason, and it could have killed the rider as easily as the horse, had the rifle wielder so wished, for Whitey was an expert rifle shot. But, although the outlaws had expected to make him give up after he was afoot, they had failed miserably in this attempt.

Boyce did not know that the same three men who had ambushed him had ridden on fast to the Clawhammer for the purpose of getting Ellen away from the place before he arrived, but had departed when they found the place deserted.

As soon as it became light Boyce went out into the horse pasture. Several teams had been turned in there, as well as a few gentle saddle horses, and after a long, tiresome chase he succeeded in getting them into a corner where he could rope a saddle horse. He found an old saddle at the barn that would serve him, and at last he was ready to go. But he was vexed to find that the sun was over an hour high.

When he neared the Bidwell homestead this time he made sure that no one took him by surprise as had happened on the occasion of his previous visit. He saw the huge, hulking Babe puttering about the corrals, but he saw nothing of Ina or the calico horse he had come to associate with her. Ignoring Babe, he rode on up to the house. He saw the fat woman disappear inside, and then Luther Bidwell strolled out with an air of cocksure impudence.

"Mornin', stranger. Lost some more colts?" the old man grinned.

"I haven't lost any colts, but I've lost something else," Boyce said in a tone that wiped the grin off Bidwell's face. The Clawhammer foreman radiated danger, and the man recognized it.

"Well, I ain't seen nothin' over here onusual," Bidwell hastened to say.

"Where's your daughter?" Boyce snapped out.

"Ina? Why—why—she pulled out of here 'fore daylight this mornin'."

"Where'd she go?"

"Now I couldn't tell yuh that. Ina has got so she don't tell her folks nothin' no more. Even if she had, I reckon I wouldn't be obleeged tuh tell you," the man said with an air of faint bravery.

"If I thought you knew, you certainly would tell me," Boyce said crisply. "She wrote a note to my sister yesterday to lure her away from the ranch so she could be kidnaped by those

crook friends of yours, the Highhouses. I knew you people were no good, but I didn't think a girl like that could stoop to commit such a despicable crime."

"Yuh shore about that?" Bidwell demanded.

"Here's the note. It's your daughter's handwritin', ain't it?"

Bidwell inspected the note gravely, and finally admitted that it was. "If Ina's been up tuh anything like that, I don't know anything about it," the man said. "But she's been actin' mighty queer lately, an' it might be that—that—"

"You're sure you don't know where she is?"

"Absolutely sure. She left here this mornin' with a big bunch o' grub tied on behind her saddle, an' I couldn't say which way she went."

Boyce cross-examined the man a few minutes longer, and was forced to admit that he could get nothing out of him. He might have tried still longer had he not become convinced that the man really didn't know. In his own mind, however, he was certain that Ina Bidwell had gone with supplies to wherever Ellen was being detained.

He swung his horse around and started back toward the ranch. He felt that it was a matter which he would have to handle alone. An appeal to the bungling county officers could only serve to put Ellen in more danger. He tried to consider the matter coolly.

First he would return to the round-up and tell the Dixons what had happened. They would all pretend that they were unaware of anything out of the way so far as Ellen was concerned. The round-up would go on as usual, but he would have a quiet search through the Highhouse Hills, and if that failed and nothing else developed in the meantime he meant to do a little kidnaping himself.

If he got his hands on the Bidwell girl he meant to hold her until she came across with the truth, or else turn her over to the law for prosecution.

Bitter and torn with anxiety as he was, he felt reluctant about taking the final step that would ruin Ina Bidwell's life. He was glad that it was in the future, and he didn't have to think about it except as a possibility.

But no sooner had Boyce taken his departure from the Bidwell Ranch than old Luther Bidwell went inside and wrote a note to Brig Highhouse, telling him of Boyce's visit, and of the foreman's suspicions. He felt that he owed it as a neighborly duty to a man who had been generous with him. Then he called Babe.

"Take this note up in the Highhouse Hills an' give it to the first Highhouse yuh see," he ordered. "Tell 'em it's for Brig."

CHAPTER XIV

Boyce Calls for a Showdown

THE mistake Ed Boyce had made was a perfectly natural one. He had every reason to believe that something had happened to Ellen, and he could not believe that it was anything else than imprisonment. He tried to convince himself that they would not dare to harm the girl; that all they wanted was to put the screws on him. It would be only a short time until they let him know what they wanted. Until then Ellen would be safe.

But what would come after that was what bothered him. He recognized that it would probably be a choice between letting them rob the Clawhammer, with perhaps his active assistance, or—

He could not frame that thought even in his mind. It was hard to keep his head, under the circumstances.

He picked up his rifle where he had left it during the former scrimmage, and found his saddle undisturbed on the dead horse. He quickly made a change of saddles, and after a short look around, which gave no clue as to the identity of the men who had waylaid him, he rode on to where the rodeo was to be held.

It was noon and the rodeo was gath-

ered on a small flat. Five or six hundred head of cattle had been gathered, and one or two small bunches were yet to arrive. Three riders were holding the herd, while the others crowded around the chuck wagon for grub. Outwardly it was a peaceful round-up scene, but the usual air of jollification customary despite the long, hard hours of toil, was missing. The men all seemed hard-faced, expectant.

A dozen or more pairs of eyes lifted to inspect Boyce as he swung down, but no man vouchsafed him a greeting. Even the Dixons said nothing.

"How's it going, Highhouse?" Boyce casually asked of Brig.

"Not so good. Cattle are workin' back toward the ranches," was the sullen reply.

"Good, that's where I want mine," Boyce said, and again the eyes of the men were inquiringly on him, but nobody asked a question.

"How come yuh to be ridin' that old spavined cayuse?" Jack Parmer then queried suddenly, as he noticed the change of horses.

"Other one fell down an' killed himself last night," Boyce answered in a casual tone. "Had to walk ten miles home." He had just filled his plate with beans, which he appeared to be regarding with studious care, yet not a flicker of expression on the faces of the men escaped him. The men he watched most closely were Ace, Jake, and Folland Highhouse. They betrayed no more than mild interest, but he saw George Weeks look furtively toward the two punchers whom Boyce believed were brothers despite the difference in surnames. He wondered then if it was possible these were the men instead of the three he had suspected. He did not know for sure that there had been only three, but the number and direction of their shots had indicated as much.

"How was Ellen?" Dan Dixon inquired.

"Feelin' fine," Boyce said heartily. "Crazy about ranch life."

This time he was particularly watching Weeks and his two friends, and he saw a meaning exchange of glances; but what it meant, he didn't know. If they had abducted Ellen, they must know that he was lying, but their looks had not seemed to imply that. In fact, as nearly as he could read those glances, they expressed confirmation of some previously expressed guess, and perhaps some disappointment.

"Sorry I can't stay an' help this afternoon, but I've got to get back to the ranch so I can drive to Daggett before the stores close," he said after dinner. He could see that his words had registered, and the whole crew imputed far more significance to them than the situation justified.

He went out to the place where the remuda was being held for the men to get their afternoon mounts, and caught the best horse in his own string. He found Don Dixon by his side.

"Horses do fall an' break their necks sometimes, but it's doggoned seldom," Don declared. "Did it ever happen to you?"

"In all my years of ridin' it never happened but once," Ed replied. "That was ten years ago."

"I thought so. What happened?"

"He was shot," Ed answered. "Some bullets sorta flowed over me, but I think it was a joke."

"No doubt."

"Anyway, I don't think they meant to erase me plumb entire," Ed said. "Don, when I got home Ellen wasn't there."

"She wasn't? Do—do you mean somethin' happened to her?"

"I'm afraid so!" He told about the note, and the other circumstances.

"An' you never let on! I hand it to you, Ed—that took nerve. But what're we goin' tuh do?"

"Carry on with the round-up, an' keep your eyes open. Until a few minutes ago I thought it was the Highhouses. Now I suspect Weeks, Mason, and Groat of havin' a big hand in it. The fact is, Don, every man on this

whoop-up except us three is an outlaw."

"An' we're just playin' around on their doorstep like innocent little lambs waitin' for the bottle?"

"An' gittin' the ax," Boyce added grimly.

"I suppose you're goin' tuh town tuh notify the officers, but what does me an' Dan do?"

"If I'd been goin' to see the officers I wouldn't have waited to come out here," Boyce said. "Don't forget that it's still our business to look after Clawhammer cattle. If us three pulled away from the job I think we could look for the whole layout in Plummer's Hole. You boys say nothin', but keep your eyes open. I'm going to look for Ellen."

"You're the boss; but if it was me I'd say let the cattle go till we find out what's become of her," Don argued.

"No, it can't be done. If we stopped this round-up they'd know at once what we meant to do. For the present, leave the search to me. I'm going to visit the Highhouse country this afternoon. Don't worry if I don't show up to-morrow."

"All right," Don said grudgingly. "But if you don't show up then this whoop-up can git along without a pair of Dixons."

Boyce had kept his eyes open while the round-up was in the Highhouse Hills, and he had a pretty thorough knowledge of the country there. He had found out where Ock Highhouse, the man with the long beard, lived, and this was the place he intended to look over first.

Most of the Highhouse ranches were small and located in canyon mouths where small creeks furnished water for their hay. Ock's house was directly in a canyon, and was built upon a creek bank, and almost entirely surrounded with willows. The ridge on the north side was steep and high, and lined with shale rock slides. On the south side were numerous steep draws filled with aspen and maple almost to the top. Below the house was the open hay land. All in all, it was a difficult place to approach secretly.

Ock Highhouse had not been to the round-up except on that one occasion. Boyce was sure he would find the man at home, and he decided to ride up openly, rather than attempt any spying on him. Lurking and spying were not tactics which appealed to him, anyway. If it had to be done, he would resort to it later. Now he felt that he could come closer to the desired information by a straight talk.

TWO hours before his arrival there Babe Bidwell had handed his father's letter to Ock Highhouse. The letter was unsealed, and Ock had not hesitated to read it. His bearded lips parted in an evil grin. If this fellow Boyce could be made to continue to believe that his sister had been kidnaped, then things would go as well as if the actual fact had been accomplished—and would be far safer for the Highhouses.

"You wait here, Babe," Ock had said. "I may have somethin' for you to do." Chuckling into his beard, he walked along a trail through the brush until he was some three hundred yards above his house. He turned off abruptly to the left and weaved in and out through the brush until he reached the bottom of one of the aspen-covered draws. A short distance up this he stopped and whistled three short, shrill notes. A moment later the ugly head of Quall Bidwell appeared.

"Hello, Ock. What's doin'?" Quall asked eagerly. He had now abandoned the sling for his arm. Hank appeared behind him, and his face was quite well healed.

"Go on back," Ock ordered, and the men withdrew into a carefully camouflaged dugout—a whiskey still that was Ock's chief source of income.

"I guess it wasn't such a bad break, after all, you fellers comin' here. Mebbe yuh can be useful," he said.

"Well, we got damn tired o' stayin'

up here with the ghost of that miner," Hank said. "We gotta have action."

"You go pryin' around an' yuh'll run plump into that sheriff, that's what you'll do," Ock sneered. "Yuh'll either stay right here, or yuh'll go back tuh that cabin yuh come from."

"But I thought yuh said we could be useful," Hank remonstrated.

"Yuh can. Here's an interestin' letter from yore old man."

The two read the letter with an air of puzzlement.

"But what's it mean? Has somebody got the girl, or ain't they?" Quall asked, his slow wits failing to grasp the situation.

"Of course not. The girl must have gone to town, or else that sister of yours has lured her off some place tuh make Boyce turn Roy loose. She's a smart one, Ina is."

"Too damn smart," Quall agreed.

"Well, as long as Boyce thinks she's been took, the thing is tuh play up tuh his idees," Ock went on. "He blames you fellers fer all his troubles, an' yo're on the underground anyway. I want you to write a note to Boyce, demandin'—I'll tell yuh what tuh write. Here's paper an' a pencil."

"I can't hardly write my own name, an' Hank ain't much better," Quall objected.

"That's fine. Write 'er down, Hank."

Hank seated himself before a covered barrel of mash, and laboriously wrote out the words as Ock dictated.

mister boyce:

We have kidnaped yore sister, come across ef you dont want something dredful to hapen her. First off you let Roy go then you come alone to the north west corner post of the clawhammer ranch and youl be took to where yore sister is at.

Nothin will hapen to either of you as long as you sign bills of sale fer the cattle as we ask you to. When weve plundored everything we want you can both go free. Them terms may seem hard but ef you don't do as we say youl never see yore sister alive again.

signed, some desprit men.

"But, look yere, Ock, that'll put us in the pen if they ever find out who wrote it," Hank protested.

"Put yuh in the pen nothin'," Ock scoffed. "They've already got a kidnapin' charge against yuh, yuh fools. The only way tuh git that dropped is to force Boyce tuh sign a paper sayin' that he never was kidnaped. When we git our hands on him, we can make him do anythin'. What we plan tuh do is make him confess that he's the crook. Then Brig gits back in an' we have things our own way."

"I b'lieve Ock's right," Quall declared. "I'm shore tired o' layin' around doin' nothin'. An' I'd like tuh show that bird he can't knock me down an' shoot me up an' git away with it."

"I think this'd oughta have Brig's approval, but I'm too busy tuh go myself," Ock stated. "Think that simple brother o' yours could take it over to the round-up?"

"Shore," replied Quall; "that's one thing about Babe—he allus does just as he's told. Git an idee into his head an' you can't knock it out."

"Good. I'll just write a brief line tuh Brig tuh send along, explainin' our idees," Ock said. He took the pencil and scrawled another note:

Dear Brig:

Right here's a chance to get everything we want without the risk of taking that girl. We can make Boyce frame himself so tight that he can't budge, and it'll be a lot better for us to handle this than to let them Plummer's Hole fellers do it and have that much more of a hold on us.

Ock.

Ock took all three notes back and gave them to Babe, with explicit instructions that he was to deliver them to Brig Highhouse and nobody else.

"Will Brig gimme a job?" Babe asked eagerly.

"Sure he'll give you a job—an' I'll give you a five-dollar bill right now. But don't give them to any other Highhouse. If you see Folland or Jake first, you ask 'em where Brig is, but don't trust 'em with the letters. You understand?"

"Sure, I know, I know," said Babe.

"All right, laddie; on yore way," Ock dismissed him.

OCK HIGHHOUSE was in front of his cabin, surrounded by a numerous brood of children when Ed Boyce rode up.

Boyce had to open a gate and ride in plain sight for a distance of two hundred yards. While he was opening the gate he saw a little girl dash into the house and come out with something which she handed to her father. Ed was certain that it was a gun, and when he got closer he saw that Ock indeed wore his artillery. Boyce had also observed a fourteen-year-old boy from the gate, but when he reached the house the youth was missing. The younger children had also taken themselves out of reach, but they could be seen peering around corners.

Just before Ed arrived, Ock summoned a ten-year-old boy to his side, and then this youngster disappeared.

"Howdy, Mr. Boyce—'light an' rest yore saddle," Ock invited hospitably.

"Thanks, Mr. Highhouse. Reckon I won't be stoppin' long," Boyce refused. "I would like to trouble you for a drink of water, though."

The unexpected request had the effect of giving a feeling of uncertainty as to the reason for his presence. Ock shouted for one of his children to bring a dipper of water, and a small girl timidly complied. Ed drank the water and thanked the child.

Boyce had come for a showdown with Ock Highhouse, but he couldn't bring himself to force a gunplay with the man in the presence of his wife and children. Then, too, he had an idea that the fourteen-year-old boy who had disappeared was covering him with a gun from some place of concealment close at hand.

"Mr. Highhouse, in passin' your hay field I noticed a kind of derrick that's new to me. I wonder if you'd be good enough tuh ride down an' show me how it works. Or shall we walk?"

Boyce was surprised that he could make his voice sound so silky when every cell in his brain vibrated with hate.

Ock was plainly nonplussed. It seemed a perfectly natural, neighborly request, but the letter he had just read from Luther Bidwell, if true, meant that this man's mind must be full of murderous thoughts. He had a feeling that Boyce just wanted to get him away from his base, as it were; but he was at a loss how to refuse. It took him several minutes to make up his mind.

"All right," he said, heaving himself to his feet. "We'll walk down through the hay. Buck," he bellowed, "bring yore rifle an' come down in the field with us. You orta git a shot at them badgers that's been diggin' up the meader."

Almost instantly the fourteen-year-old boy appeared with a rifle, and Ed knew that his conjecture about being covered with a gun was correct. He dismounted and walked by Ock Highhouse's side down through the young hay toward the derrick he had commented upon. It was a very ordinary derrick, and he had seen hundreds like it.

Young Buck, with his rifle in the crook of his arm, came along about two rods behind the men. The boy handled the weapon with perfect familiarity, and Ed knew that he could be fully as dangerous as a man.

They reached the derrick, discussing nothing more important than the growth of the hay. Boyce turned abruptly and walked toward the boy. "Let me see your gun, son. Mebbe I'd like tuh make a trade with yuh," he smiled.

With a few swift steps he was by the boy's side before either father or son could think how to handle the situation. Buck jerked the rifle to one side, but not quite quick enough; Ed's left hand clutched the barrel, and with a grim smile he twisted the gun out of the stripling's hands.

"Kinda rough about that, wasn't yuh?" Ock demanded hotly.

"Yeah, maybeso," Ed Boyce conceded evenly. "But not half as rough as I'll

be with you if you don't tell me where my sister is."

"Your what?" Ock's attempt to show surprise was badly done.

"You heard me, you murdering old rascal," Boyce gritted. "I got you out here to get the truth out of you, and I propose to get it."

Ock's eyes anxiously watched the foreman's free hand which hovered not far above the butt of a bone-handled six-gun, but he made no move toward drawing his own weapon. He tried hard to conceal his chagrin, and his anger toward his son.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," he said.

"You don't know anything about the way I was tricked into a cabin up here, either, I suppose," Boyce rasped. "Or about the attempt you made to murder me at the Clawhammer after I escaped?"

"Of course not. Why—"

"Listen to me, Highhouse, I'm not fooled for a minute. One of the fellows who was in that cabin with the Bidwells was your son, Folland. I shot somebody in the foot, an' he's limpin' yet. When you followed me to the ranch that time I saw the end of your beard below the mask. Now I know you've got my sister. You'll tell me where she is, or—I'm givin' you an even break."

CHAPTER XV

Three Letters

INA had left home early the morning of Ed Boyce's visit, principally because her excited nerves demanded constant physical action, and because it was always unpleasant for her at home when her stepmother was awake. She intended to call upon Hank and Quall, and then she meant to take a long ride over the range to inform herself as to conditions in which she had an indirect interest.

Her day's adventures began with the discovery that her half brothers had left the cabin the night before. That they had gone into the Highhouse Hills, and that they would be mixed up with whatever new crookedness impended, was certain.

This made her disgusted and furious with them, but it drew her toward the Highhouse Hills rather than to the upper end of the Clawhammer range where the round-up was being conducted, as she had first intended. If she could find them she meant to tell them that further assistance from her depended upon their immediate return to the cabin.

She had wasted considerable time making the trip to the cabin, and she did not hurry her horse. She had brought her lunch, and she stopped to eat it before leaving the Clawhammer range, which she had to cross.

She had not gone far after that before she came to a dead horse, with an old saddle lying close beside it. It took her but a moment to ascertain that the horse had been shot, evidently while under a rider. She could also see that the saddle had never been on the horse, for the cinch, as it was adjusted, was much too short. She found where the rider had struck the ground and crawled away. From the looks of things, he had escaped, but somebody had thriftily exchanged an old saddle for a better one.

"This has all the earmarks of a near murder," the girl murmured. It brought home to her the gravity of the situation on the range. She had set herself to interfere, and she realized that her sex would not save her if the outlaws ever found out that she had given aid or comfort to the people they were out to destroy. Yet the fact that she did feel herself lined up against them gave her a savage satisfaction.

She saw that the dead animal was a Clawhammer horse, and from the location, and the way it had fallen, she concluded that the rider must have been Ed Boyce on his way home. She felt certain now that she had saved Ellen Boyce from the hands of the outlaws, and together with the thrill

which that gave her was a feeling of relief to find that Boyce himself had escaped.

Being undecided about where to go next—her natural curiosity prompting her to go to the round-up first and find out if anything had happened there, and then return by way of the Highhouse Hills—she kept on going until she was midway of the two places.

She was still vacillating when she saw a lone horseman riding toward the round-up from the direction in which the Highhouses held forth. She watched for a few minutes, and then with a gasp of surprise she realized that the rider was Babe.

She looked carefully to see that there was nobody else in sight, and then galloped across to head her half brother off.

"What are you doing here, Babe?" she asked anxiously. She knew that he frequently took long jaunts over the country on the big bay horse which Roy had given him because it was strong enough to carry his great weight, but she had a premonition that his presence here was not due to accident.

"I'm takin' letters to Brig Highhouse," he answered with a manner of great importance.

"Letters? Who gave them to you?"

"Pap sent me with one right after that Boyce feller was to our house, an' then Ock he give me two more," he informed proudly.

"Well, well. Let me see them, will you, Babe?"

"Ock said they was for Brig. He said if I saw Jake or Folland I was to ask where Brig was but not give 'em the letters."

Ina meant to get the letters, but if possible, she meant to get them without arousing Babe's anger. "He was afraid they wouldn't give 'em to Brig, but that didn't mean that I couldn't see them," she wheedled.

She reached out her hand smilingly, and Babe, who adored her, and would always do as she ordered, handed them over. To Ina's great relief none of them was in an envelope. The first one she opened was the illiterate missive which had been so painfully written by Hank. She knew the handwriting, but the meaning baffled her until she read the others. Then the whole truth dawned upon her.

"That damned Chink has got scared an' run off without givin' Boyce Ellen's note," she voiced her one mistake aloud.

She was furiously angry at Hank and Quall for their utter lack of principle, and scarcely less so at her father for his meddling. It was a few minutes before she comprehended just how important were the letters in her hands. The one revealed that a criminal act was to be attempted against Ed Boyce, and the other admitted, over the signature of Ock Highhouse, that a conspiracy to rob the Clawhammer existed between the Highhouses and the robbers in Plummer's Hole.

Her father's note was corroborative of the truth of both the others, since it was self-evident that it had started the plans. She realized that into her hands had been thrust a weapon which could at least send the two leaders of the Highhouse clan to prison. She had the "whip seat" and she proposed to hold it.

"Babe, I'm going to the cow camp, and I'll see Brig," she said. "These letters concern me, anyway. But you must go home at once. Your mother is worried about you."

"But Ock he gimme fi' dollars to take these letters to Brig, an' he said Brig might gimme a job," Babe protested.

"No, Babe, Brig doesn't hire men any more, and you've already got your five dollars. You go on home. I'll take the letters." She thought of cautioning him not to tell what he had done with them, but she reflected that this might get him into trouble. If by accident he should be questioned, she felt that it was better for the blame to fall upon her than on him.

"Did you happen to see Hank and

Quall up to Ock's place?" she asked.

"No; was they there?" he asked innocently.

"Well, you'd have seen them if they was," she parried with a smile, and sent the fellow on his way.

AS soon as Babe was out of sight, Ina started out to do the things which she knew to be necessary. First of all she had to find or get word to Ed Boyce that Ellen was safe. Much as she thought she hated him, she could not subject him to this kind of torture when she could set his mind at rest. The only place she knew to look for him was at the round-up.

But as she rode along her mind was busy trying to figure out the best use for the evidence which had come into her possession.

Certainly she had no intention of turning it over to Ed Boyce—she would as soon have thought of giving it to Brig Highhouse. Nor would she give it to the law. Hank and Quall would be the chief sufferers, and she had a point to gain for herself—Roy's freedom. Possibly salvation also from a hated marriage with Ace Highhouse.

She made up her mind to seek Hank and Quall after she had relieved Boyce's fears. She would tell them frankly that she held their damning letter and would use it unless she got the thing she wanted. They would have to sever all connections with the Highhouses, and agree, in writing, to testify against them if called upon.

Then she would lay down the law to Brig and Ock Highhouse. She would give them a brief time to leave the Highhouse Hills forever on pain of having the letters turned over to the law. She felt sure that they could be bluffed. And while they were preparing to leave she would strike a bargain with Ed Boyce. If he would release Roy she would answer for the Highhouses leaving the country.

If Brig and Ock left, she felt that the whole flock would follow, unless it should be Ace. She turned a bit cold whenever she thought of him. Her settlement with him would have to be on a different basis.

Obviously it was highly important that the notes be where the Highhouses could not recover them. She thought of hiding them some place on the range, but she realized instantly that she might never be able to return for them in case the outlaws decided to watch her movements. She felt the comforting handle of the gun at her waist, and decided that the safest place for the letters for the present was on her person.

She stopped and removed one of her riding boots, and thrust the three letters up between the laced bottoms of her riding breeches and her stocking, and then drew on the boot.

She reached the rodeo while the cutting-out was still in process, and at once she was joined by Ace Highhouse, who displayed a most irksome air of ownership toward her.

"Long way from home, ain't you, Ina?" he demanded.

"Have you ever heard that I was afraid to be out alone after dark?" she retorted.

"Well, no," he admitted with a laugh. "Still, as the gal who's goin' tuh be my wife, I don't like tuh see yuh takin' chances."

"I'm not takin' any, Ace. I can always take care of myself—don't forget that."

"Takin' a slam at me or somethin'?" he demanded a little angrily.

"Why should I? Where's Boyce?"

"Oh, him? He's gone to Daggett. We're givin' him all the rope he wants. When we git ready all we gotta do is jerk in the slack. Don't you worry none. When Roy's case is called, Boyce won't be there tuh answer no roll calls."

"He's gone to Daggett? How do you know?"

"He was here at noon, an' he left soon after. Said that's where he was goin'."

"I see." This meant then that Boyce

would soon know the truth about Ellen, and that was one matter she could dismiss from her mind. She saw Brig Highhouse watching her, and despite her cool courage a shiver of fear shot through her as she reflected what he was going to think as soon as he learned that she had in her possession letters intended for him, which would likely send him to prison.

"Say, I'm goin' home with yuh," Ace said. "You stick around a few minutes an' I'll be ready."

She had not looked for anything like that; but Ace didn't ask permission to do a thing—he simply did it. As she rode around the herd she was, as always, fascinated by the sight of a round-up in progress. She watched the sleek, heaving sides and white faces of the bewildered cattle as they milled helplessly to get as far as possible away from the riders who held them.

As she stood there, she noticed that the one or the other of the Dixon twins was always watching her closely, and their attitude could not by any means be mistaken for friendly. Then Jack Parmer rode up to her side.

"Hello, Ina," he greeted hurriedly. "What d'ye know?"

"About what?" she countered.

"About the way things are goin'. You know as well as I do that certain people are out to fix this new boss of the Clawhammer. It's jake with me, an' I figger to git my share, but there's limits tuh what I'll do. These people are figgerin' on gittin' Miss Boyce an' takin' her into Plummer's Hole. By Gawd, I won't stand for it. Can't you do somethin' tuh make her play safe?"

"I have, Jack," she answered. "I got her to go to Daggett."

"The devil you did? Why, at noon Boyce was sayin' how much she liked ranch life; an' he said he was goin' to Daggett this afternoon, but he sure didn't say she had already gone to stay. Of course I guessed that she wasn't at the ranch last night, so—"

"How did you guess it?" she asked quickly.

"They don't tell me everything; but Weeks an' these two other fellers from the hole, that Joe Dice sent, slipped away before Boyce started, an' he come back sayin' his horse had fell and broke its neck. They didn't git in till long after midnight, but they didn't have the girl. I'm sure of that," he explained.

This let her know who had killed Boyce's horse, but she was unable to guess what the foreman's game was. She began to doubt that he had gone to town.

Jack Parmer showed some evidence of being far superior in character to his outlaw associates. She wondered if she could trust him.

"Jack, how did you ever come to get mixed up with this gang?" she asked.

"Oh, the usual thing, I s'pose. I got mixed up in a stealin' scrape an' had time tuh make my getaway. I'd heard of Plummer's Hole, so I made for there an' convinced Joe Dice I was really on the dodge. He sent me up here to work on the Clawhammer for Brig Highhouse, along with Skelly, Weeks, an' yore brothers. I'm not a squealer, but I sure don't like the game they're playin' here," he explained.

"That's me, Jack," the girl said softly. "This gang is too tough for us. We can't stand for either murder or kidnaping. But that's what'll happen if something ain't done. I've got some evidence that'll put the Highhouses behind bars if they don't drop this thing, but I don't know what this Joe Dice may do. Will you keep yore eyes open an' try to let me know if they decide on anything desperate?"

"You bet I will, Ina. You're a brick. Gawd only knows how you can be what you are an' still be a Bidwell, but if ever I can help you or that other girl, you can count on me," he said with an earnestness that she knew was genuine.

"Thanks, Jack," she said sincerely, and touched his gloved hand with hers.

At that moment Ace Highhouse rode up and announced that he was ready to start. She had to ride away with the

fellow, but she knew that he might embarrass her plans considerably. She was wondering what Boyce was up to, and as she rode away with Ace she saw the Dixon boys get together, and she knew they must be discussing her.

Despite the fact that she had the damning letters in her possession, she had a sense of impending danger. But, strangely enough, it did not occur to her that she might be the one in danger—it was always the Boyces she thought of in that connection.

Hank and Quall were at Ock Highhouse's place, and she determined to see them in spite of Ace Highhouse.

"I've got to see Hank and Quall before I go home," she said. "They've left the cabin where they were hidden an' are up at your Uncle Ock's. The sheriff is still hunting for 'em."

"He can't find 'em up at Ock's, but mebbe you'd just as well stay all night there yoreself," Ace said.

They had reached the lane leading to Ock Highhouse's cabin when they met Ed Boyce.

CHAPTER XVI

Ina Uses her Gun

AS Boyce stood with Ock and his son down at the field where the derrick was, facing them, with the upper hand, now, Ock's face had turned a ghastly green above the beard when he saw that his plan to keep Ed Boyce always at a disadvantage had been frustrated by the latter's quickness of mind and hand.

Ock knew there was no use to longer deny his part in the attempts that had been made to capture and hold Boyce. And he knew that he dared not risk his life by making a draw when Boyce had an even break.

"Come on. Out with it—where's my sister?" Boyce breathed threateningly.

"I don't know, Boyce," the man denied.

"I'll give you till I count ten under my breath tuh tell me the truth," Boyce said evenly.

"The Bidwells have got her," Ock said explosively.

"Where?"

"I don't know. All I know is that they sent a note up here which said they had her, an' it was meant for you. It said that unless you come tuh time an' done what was wanted that yuh'd never see her again. They wanted us tuh see that you got the note. They sent it by that half-witted one they call Babe, an' I sent him on over to the round-up to deliver it to my brother Brig so he could give it to you," Ock explained.

A sense of bafflement settled over Boyce. What could he do? Killing this scoundrel would not help Ellen. Indeed, anything that he might do was dangerous to her. He thought of trying to hold this man as a hostage, but realized that it would only encumber his own movements and would probably do no good.

"You don't deny that you and your brother expect to control the Clawhammer through this?" he queried.

Old Ock thought a minute. "No, I don't," he admitted. "Yo're just lucky that yuh got a sister. If it wasn't fer her givin' us a hold on yuh we'd bump yuh off if yuh didn't see our way."

"And if it wasn't for her I'd bump yuh off where yuh stand," Boyce retorted.

"Yore sister is on her way tuh Plummer's Hole," Ock lied. "'Best thing you can do is make terms with us. I'll send the boy after Brig, an' we'll let yuh know what we want."

Boyce tried hard to think what was best to do. He had no reason to doubt the truthfulness of what the man said. If, to save Ellen, he accepted infamy, disgrace, and dishonor, he would also have to surrender himself to his foes. What assurance would he have after that that either of them would be safe? These men were desperate criminals. After they got what they wanted they were far more likely to murder both of them than take chances by letting them go. For Ellen, it might be worse.

Suddenly he knew that he had to gamble with Ellen's life. The chance of saving her might be slim, but it remained a chance so long as he retained his freedom of action. Once he surrendered they would be utterly at the mercy of men who knew no mercy.

He reached out and jerked Highhouse's gun from the holster and threw it far away into the grass. Then he tossed away the boy's rifle.

"Highhouse, God alone knows why I don't kill you, and just as many more of your lousy breed as I can," he said through tightly clinched jaws. "None of you is fit to live. I suppose I'll have to give up, in the end; but I'm goin' back to the round-up an' collect my men. Then I'll have it out with yore brother and his gang. If I thought they wouldn't come to time, I'd kill you where you stand. But don't try to head me off, because you can't do it, in the first place, and it'll be worse for you if you do. And don't try sendin' any boys."

Would Highhouse believe that he was fool enough to trust to the men who had been planted on him because they were crooked? Regarding the man closely, he believed that he did. Highhouse showed signs of feeling relief. Ed believed that he stood just one chance. He had gained a few hours' time by forcing the truth from Ock Highhouse. They would be expecting him to waste some time in negotiations, but instead of that, while they were waiting for him to make known his attitude, he would be on his way to Plummer's Hole. Most of the outlaws were on the Clawhammer range, and he might be able to overhaul the Bidwells, or whoever else might be with Ellen, and get her back.

He thought of tying Ock and his young son up to make sure that they didn't communicate with the others too soon, but gave up the idea as impracticable. He couldn't tie up the whole family, women and children as well as old Ock, and so it would do no good to tie anybody. Nor did he care to encumber himself by taking them along.

"Come on," he ordered curtly. "We'll go back to the road, while you send this kid up to the house for my horse. If there's any monkey business on the way, you'll pay for it."

"Go on an' git his horse, an' don't let no grass grow under yore feet, Buck," Ock instructed his son.

"Lead the horse back, an' don't bother to get one of your own," Boyce added.

The horse was brought in a reasonable time, and Boyce mounted. It was half a mile back to the house, and by the time Ock and his son walked back there and secured horses he would be out of sight and they would stand no chance to overtake him and spy upon his movements, or to enable the other outlaws to head him off. He didn't believe they would be in any great hurry, anyway. Both of them had been rather badly scared. He forgot about them when, a few minutes later, he came face to face to Ina Bidwell—and her cavalier.

Truly they were meeting under dramatic circumstances. The nerves of both were keyed up to the highest pitch. Each one knew the impending danger. Boyce knew that he was invading an outlaw hangout where the odds were heavy that he would not return. Ina knew that when she reached Ock Highhouse's cabin it would be made known that the letters had not been delivered to old Brig, and her part would surely be suspected. How far they would go to get those letters she could not know.

Both of them realized as they met that the other played a prominent part in the intertwined events which had led up to the crisis they were now facing, but each misunderstood the motives of the other. Ed was the most at fault here, for he was firmly convinced that the girl was one of his bitterest enemies.

Ina knew that when the truth came out she would have no friends. Hank and Quall would be more eager, and

just as brutal, as the Highhouses, once they knew her game. Ace would not hesitate about trying to make her give up her evidence. Her gun was her only defense, and she had reason to doubt that it would be sufficient.

She could tell Ed Boyce that she had evidence enough in her boot to confuse his foes, and if he doubted her word she could prove it. Ace might make trouble, but she would be watching him if Boyce couldn't take care of him. Together they could defeat the Highhouses.

But Ina was not ready to show her hand until she had fully strengthened her position. She wanted to see her brothers, and then get the papers concealed in some safe place where they could be gotten when necessary. And then she would be in a position to demand justice for Roy without giving Boyce a chance to claim any credit at all for the victory over the outlaws.

In other words, Ina wanted to force him to an abject surrender in their personal feud. Her common sense told her, however, that it might be best to place her cards on the table then and there. Much depended upon his attitude.

Ace Highhouse was the first to speak. "Well, Boyce, I thought yuh'd gone to town," he said.

"Did you?" Boyce responded coldly. "I've just had a talk with an uncle of yours up here, an' something he said made me think I'd better go back to the round-up this evenin'." His eyes rested for a moment upon Ina, and in their depths she read a contempt that seared her very soul. All thought of telling him now what she knew was driven from her mind. She would let him suffer for awhile.

"That's funny. What was it?" Ace asked with his usual lack of reticence.

"It had to do with the letter which the lady's brother"—he indicated Ina with an expressive, sardonic nod of the head—"brought up here to be delivered to me. They sent him on to the round-up, so I'm goin' there to get it."

"'S funny—I didn't see anything of Babe around there," Ace commented. "Did you, Ina?"

"Why, yes. I met Babe, an' when he told me he had some letters for Mr. Boyce, I told him to go straight home an' leave the letters at the Clawhammer ranch house," she said. An instant later she added maliciously, "I'd forgot about you orderin' him an' all other Bidwells to keep away from there."

Boyce was puzzled. What the girl's game was, he couldn't understand, but for some reason or other she wanted to send him on a wild goose chase back to the ranch. He had no intention of going.

"Do you know where my sister is?" he asked bluntly.

"I certainly do," she replied swiftly. "She's in Daggett."

He gave her a long, hard look, which expressed clearer than words his disbelief. A wave of angry color swept over the girl's cheeks. She had told him the truth; if he wouldn't believe it that was his own fault.

"Thanks," he said sardonically. "I guess I'll ride to the ranch, then, an' find out what the Bidwells have to write to me." He touched his horse lightly with the spurs and rode on. But he had not changed his mind about going on to Plummer's Hole.

"What the hell did he mean about askin' you where his sister is?" Ace demanded.

"He's got the idea that she's been kidnaped."

"And is she in Daggett?"

"Of course."

"But what about them letters Babe had?"

"I suppose it's somebody trying to scare him," she said indifferently. "Let's go on."

There was a puzzled frown upon Ace's face until they reached Ock's cabin.

"See Boyce?" Ock queried.

"Yeah. What's it all about?"

"Why, we've got that bird in a sack, damn him," Ock snarled. "He's head-

in' for the round-up tuh git his men—his men, mind yuh—tuh fight Brig an' the gang there, an' find out where his sister is. An' the beauty of it is that none of us have got her."

"Well, I kinda gathered that, an' of course him an' them two cussed twins can't do nothin' against the gang, but I'm afraid Dad might have let the cat outa the bag if we hadn't met Boyce," Ace murmured.

"How d'ye mean?" Ock demanded.

"Why, Ina here met Babe an' kinda mussed up the play. She sent him home an' told him tuh leave the letters at the Clawhammer."

"What?" Ock screeched. He turned upon the girl in a raging fury. "Why, yuh damn little fool, them letters wasn't for Boyce—only one of 'em. They was for Brig. I told that idiot not tuh give 'em tuh anybody but Brig, even give him five dollars tuh make sure. I—I'll kill him."

"It wasn't Babe's fault," Ina said hastily. "I made him show me the letters, an' I opened one of them. It was written by Hank an' was surely meant for Boyce. I supposed the others were, too. I know Boyce goes home every night, an' I didn't want Babe out after dark, so I told him what I did."

"But the other two letters—didn't you read 'em?" Ock howled.

"I just noticed that one of them was in my dad's handwriting, so I didn't bother any more about it," she answered quietly.

"My Gawd, what a simp! W-why, you don't know as much as Babe! Ace, did you say that Boyce had gone tuh the Clawhammer tuh git them letters?"

"That's what he said."

For a minute old Ock was unable to speak. There was foam on his whiskers, and he glared angrily at the girl.

"Do you know what she's done, Ace?" he finally burst out. "She's plumb ruined us if Boyce ever gits them letters!"

"Come on—git it outa yuh," Ace growled. "What was in 'em that was so bad?"

"Why, one of 'em stated that his sister had been kidnaped, an' threatened him with all sorts o' things if he didn't come across. Hank Bidwell wrote that. The one her old man wrote just told us how Boyce was thinkin' his sister was kidnaped. But I wrote the third one myself tuh tell Brig what a strangle hold it would give us on him without lettin' Dice's outfit into it. An'—I signed my name, an' wrote Brig's. I never dreamed anybody else would git it," old Ock gasped, trembling like a frightened boy.

"Well, it looks tuh me like you'd been a bigger fool than Ina," Ace sneered.

"But don't yuh see, if Boyce finds them three letters he'll fog right into Daggett an' turn 'em over tuh the law? He'll find his sister safe, too, an' then he won't have nothin' tuh fear. Me an' yore dad'll shore go over the road, an' if them Bidwells turn state's evidence, as they will, you'll all go," Ock shouted excitedly.

"Where are the Bidwells?" Ace demanded, thinking first of his own safety.

"Right up here in the still. But never mind them. What we've got tuh do is beat Boyce home an' git them letters. I could kill this damn girl."

"You might try, but if you do you'll find yourself hung on the business end of a bullet," the girl retorted.

"Shut up, both of you," Ace snarled, "an' let me think."

"Buck, go git our horses," Ock roared. "If he won't do somethin' about it, we will."

"Come on, Ina," Ace ordered. "We've got a good chance to beat him there."

"Go ahead. I don't see why I should ride my head off," the girl replied coolly. "It's not me who's trying to frame Boyce."

"You're into this as deep as anybody else. You claimed you wanted him put away in brine so Roy could come clear. An' this is yore fault. Come on an' ride, an' don't stop tuh arger."

"You said you'd have Roy cleared if

I'd marry you," Ina reminded. "Are you afraid you'll meet Boyce an' need some help?"

That stung young Highhouse upon his one tender point, his vanity. "No; I don't need help, an' I'll git them letters back or bring Boyce's scalp," he rasped, and wheeling his horse he dashed away.

Ina was strongly tempted to dash after him. He wouldn't get the letters, and there was slight chance that he could even beat Boyce to the ranch. But he might encounter Boyce, and then— She refused to consider the possibilities. If they met, one or the other would probably die. She felt that it would be Ace, but she could not force herself to feel any concern about that possibility, and she resolutely refused to consider the other chance.

She hoped Boyce would go on to town when he found the letters were not there, and believed that he would. Anyway, she felt sure that she would soon be in a position to dictate terms, and among them would be a condition that he not be molested by any of the Highhouses.

Certainly she didn't dream that Boyce was on his way to Plummer's Hole, and for the moment she had forgotten the threat of Joe Dice and his men.

"You'd orta be skun alive," Ock Highhouse growled. It had been an evil day for him, for all that it had begun so auspiciously. The way Boyce had bullied him around was enough to make him murder somebody, and this girl's blunder, as he thought it, had made him a much-abused man.

"You just start in any time you feel lucky," Ina invited curtly.

"What're yuh hangin' around here for anyway?" Ock demanded.

"I want to see Quall and Hank. Where are they?"

"None of your business."

"Oh, it ain't, eh? Don't make me mad, Ock. I've been helpin' those boys hide from the sheriff, but if they've got so big that I can't talk to 'em, I reckon I know who they will talk to," she warned.

"Wouldn't surprise me none if all you lousy Bidwells didn't turn state's evidence in a pinch. We never orta had anything to do with yuh," he raged.

"I'm askin' you where they are," she insisted evenly.

"Aw, hell, go on an' talk to 'em if you want to, but be damned sure tuh tell 'em to keep their mouths shut. Milt," he bawled at his ten-year-old son, "you go fetch them Bidwells down here."

A few minutes later Hank and Quall came cautiously out of the brush, and Ina, who had remained on her horse, went to meet them.

"Well, you fellows put yourselves into a nice pickle when you wrote that ransom letter," she began.

"What d'ye mean?" Hank blustered, his very manner betraying his fright.

"You let Ock Highhouse persuade you to write it. Now the letter will go to the officers, and the evidence against you will be iron-clad.

"Don't blow up," she cautioned with a thin-lipped smile. "You two won't need to suffer if you do as I say. But you've got to go back to that cabin, an' be ready to testify against the Highhouses unless they agree to do what I want."

"What *you* want?" Hank fairly choked.

"What I want," she agreed. "I've got the evidence, and I'm just givin' you two a chance to save yourselves. If you don't want to take it all right, I'll wash my hands of you."

"How did you git them letters?" Hank croaked.

"From Babe."

"You got 'em on yuh?" Quall asked quietly.

"I have."

The brothers exchanged glances and Quall started toward the head of her horse. "You give me them letters," he shouted. At the same time Hank moved as though to get behind her.

Ina spun Checkers swiftly, and Roy's gun appeared in her hand. "Stand back," she said. "You know I can shoot, and I'll do it if you don't behave."

They stopped in sheer, helpless amazement. But Quall's rage was too great for him to tolerate being beaten by a girl. With a bellow of rage he leaped forward.

Ina turned pale, but she straightened her wrist and pulled the trigger. She tried desperately to aim for his shoulder, but there was no time for good marksmanship, and above all she was afraid that she would miss altogether. If they once laid their hands upon her she knew they would not hesitate at anything to get the letters.

Quall's bellow changed abruptly. He spun half around and dropped to the ground, where he lay groaning loudly.

Ina turned the gun upon Hank. "You want it, too?" she asked.

"My Gawd, yuh've killed him!" Hank exclaimed. "Yore own brother!"

Without waiting to see whether Quall was dead, she forced Checkers to walk sideways until she was well past the house. Then she gave him the spurs and galloped him madly until she was miles from the place.

She stopped her panting mount at last, and regained a portion of her poise.

It would be only a short time until Ace would come back without the letters. But before that some of the Highhouses were sure to go back to Ock's and she knew that Hank would betray her without a moment's hesitation. Immediately every man the Highhouse clan could muster would be searching for her.

She again considered the advisability of hiding the letters out there on the range, but decided that there would be little more danger if she retained possession of them.

She turned Checkers toward home, and rode fast, but she chose a route through the most dismal part of the range where there was least chance of contact with her enemies.

It was long after dark before she finally reached home, and she still had the papers. As she dismounted from Checkers she realized that she was unutterably weary. She staggered a bit, and paused to think of Quall before she undid the latigo.

As she reached for the strap somebody seized both her arms.

"Come across with them letters!"

It was Ace Highhouse!

(To be continued in the next issue.)

MEMBERS OF TRAIL'S END

Whose pictures appear on pages 622 and 623

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FIRST ROW—*left to right*—Grace G. Schlordedt, Sundance, Wyo.; "Jerry," Montreal, Can.; Frances Hederick, Charleston, Ill.

SECOND ROW—*left to right*—Mildred Reeser, Louisville, Ky.; Horace Harwell, Pulaski, Tenn.; Emily Adele Upham, Richmond, Va.

THIRD ROW—*left to right*—Albert Powers, Hornell, N. Y.; Harley D. Williams, Morocco, Ind.; Henry Clay Bishop, Yakima, Wash.

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FIRST ROW—*left to right*—Ray Plockelman, Curtiss, Wis.; Dorothy Crandall, Eaton Rapids, Mich.; Bill Temper, Dalhart, Tex.

SECOND ROW—*left to right*—Gertrude Norell, New York, N. Y.; R. E. Rush, Westwood, Calif.; Ruth Luman, Parsons, Kans.

THIRD ROW—*left to right*—J. C. Roncetti, Sacramento, Calif.; Mrs. Margaret Flowerday, Detroit, Mich.; Ruby Rice, Brookfield, Mass.

Feud

By James W. Routh

Separated by a feud, ages old yet bitter and intense, two young hearts knew the misery of longing in vain. But when youth is brave, love will break a trail to happiness, though danger bar its way.

JIM DUMONT stood in the wide door of the big room, cleared ready for the dance, and meditated upon the relative merits of poker and the society of Canyon's fairest at the annual rodeo party. He was oblivious to the wistful glances cast in his direction by various susceptible young ladies, who looked with admiration upon his lean height and breadth and careless good looks, and who were perhaps not unmindful that he was the nephew and heir of Tom Dumont of the D-in-a-Box.

But Jim was undecided. He liked well enough to dance, but as yet he was heart whole, and poker had its fascinations. So he hesitated, and was about to flip a mental coin, when suddenly the choice was made.

There was a little bustle near the schoolhouse door. Eyes were turned in that direction, tongues ceased to clack. Jim Dumont stiffened as if he had unwittingly grabbed hold of an electric power line. That unmistakably was old Sam Langdon shoving his way importantly through the crowd, but whoever was it that the old sinner had in tow?

Jim's gray eyes lighted and his firm lips moved. In the whole of his twenty-four years he had never seen any feminine being so marvelously beautiful, so altogether desirable! She was neither too short nor too tall; her hair was dark and curled softly against her glowing cheek; her eyes were large and the color of violets; and her mouth, it seemed to the fascinated cowboy, was the most perfect thing he had ever seen.

Unconsciously he began to move forward across the room. Poker was forgotten. Forgotten, too, the obvious fact that there was a close connection between Sam Langdon and the girl.

People made way for him. He walked with his eyes fixed, a queer smile on his lips, wholly unaware of any of those who looked and grinned and moved aside. His whole being was centered on that radiant girl. Before he had traversed half the distance, however, the goal was gone.

The girl, taken in charge by motherly Mrs. Jennings, disappeared in the small room at the left of the entrance, where the girls shed their wraps and did mysterious things to their hair and cheeks and lips before coming forth to charm and disarm the lesser sex.

Jim Dumont paused and looked uncomfortably about, meeting several grinning faces, but finding that most of those in the room had been as interested as himself in the new arrival.

"Some jane she's turned out to be!" said a voice at his elbow. "She can make my java any time she wants!"

Dumont looked with disfavor upon the speaker. He discovered that he had never thought very highly of one Jack Morton. Slim and graceful and dark as an Indian, he was popular generally with the ladies, and, plainly, was acquainted with the unknown girl.

"Who is she?" The question forced itself past his lips.

Morton grinned mockingly. "You needn't be curious, fella. Yuh're outa the runnin' at the start. She's Langdon's girl."

"Huh!" Jim was startled, unbelieving. He blinked down at Morton from his greater height, felt anger stir within him, slowly. "Don't get funny, Morton! I ain't in the mood for kiddin'."

"Hell," returned Morton cheerfully. "I ain't kiddin'. The girl which just came in is Belle Langdon, Jim. I've knowed her since she was knee high. Been away to school for the last coupla years, which is why yuh ain't seen her before. An' she sure has improved, I'll tell the world!

"Here she comes again. Watch me, fella!"

Gloomily Jim did watch the wiry, graceful Jack Morton elbow his way through the crowd that quickly surrounded Belle Langdon. With growing resentment he saw Morton bow low before the girl, who smiled at him a marvelous smile, and permitted him to lead her onto the dance floor as the orchestra struck up the opening chords.

With his wide shoulders flattened against the wall Jim kept his eyes glued on the girl during the whole of that dance. Anyone watching him might have seen a variety of changing expressions visit his good-looking face. They would have seen his square jaw harden, and a reckless light become fixed in his steady gray eyes as the dance neared an end.

One quick glance into the card room showed him that Sam Langdon was sitting in a game, a cigar gripped in the

corner of his thin-lipped mouth, chips stacked before him. Jim Dumont moved purposefully across the room. He was at Morton's elbow when the dance ended. The startled cowboy voiced a mechanical introduction, mumbling both names in his confusion. Jim was in no mood to take chances.

"Miss Langdon, I'd admire to have the next dance with you," he said directly, firmly.

Belle looked up at him under her long lashes, and apparently approved of what she saw. She nodded, smiled, and tucked her hand under his elbow. They moved away, leaving Morton to scratch his dark head and stare after them blankly.

"I'll be damned!" said the cowboy to himself. "If ol' Sam gets wise, hell will shore pop! But I ain't sayin' a word. Not me!"

Nor was Morton the only one who stared at the couple when they took the floor. More than one observer repeated, in purport if not in actual words, the cowboy's soliloquy. For there long had been war, open and deadly, between Sam Langdon, Belle's father, and Tom Dumont, Jim's uncle.

The cause of the warfare, as happens many times, had long since become a rather vague memory, lost in the heat of the battle itself. But feeling ran so strong between the owners of the two largest cow outfits thereabouts that no puncher who aimed ever to ride for the Lazy L might ever take a job with the D-in-a-Box. And Langdon never spoke to Dumont, or Dumont to Langdon, and it was unthinkable that Langdon's daughter should dance with Dumont's nephew.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Belle," murmured Jim Dumont.

They had taken perhaps three steps of the dance, and his arm was burning from the touch of her, and his heart stuck in his throat when he looked down into her eyes, marked the way the lashes lay upon her smooth cheek, the dimple in her rounded chin.

"And you," she replied with a little smile, "are quite the fastest worker I've ever met. Why, I didn't even hear your name!"

"Call me Jim," he bade her, and gripped her a bit closer.

Momentarily she resisted, strained back to look up at him, her eyes wide and inquiring. Then a warm glow visited her cheeks, and she yielded to the pressure of his arm and they danced twice around the room. At the end of the second circuit he skillfully steered her out of a convenient door into the cool moonlit night, under the starry sky where the darkness was golden and the air was fragrant with the odor of sage and piñon.

"What's the idea?" she demanded. "I—I—"

When he looked down at her, his hand gripping her arm, she forgot to finish her protest.

"It's the best idea I've ever had," he assured her fervently. "I've got to talk to you, Belle. Gosh, do you realize that I've lived almost twenty-five years in absolute ignorance of you? That time has got to be made up somehow!"

She laughed and let him lead her to a seat on the steps of the little church across the way, where the shade of two huge pepper trees was friendly.

"Will you tell me the rest of your name now—Jim?"

"There's a heap of other things more important," he vowed.

Just what he did tell her will never be known, but they stayed there in the darkness for three full dances, and probably would have stayed longer if someone hadn't started looking for her and so alarmed Sam Langdon.

It was the old fire-eater's irate bellow which disturbed them finally. But by then the damage was done. Jim Dumont knew that he was irrevocably and forever doomed to love this girl, the daughter of his uncle's lifelong enemy.

"That is yore father, Belle," he said grimly, rising to his feet and drawing her up with him. "When he knows who you've been sittin' here with, he's

likely to raise hell! But all that quarrel—that old-time feud—is plumb foolish. We can't let it spoil our friendship!"

Her head tipped back and the stars were in her eyes. She shivered a little, perhaps with intuitive foreboding. But at the same time she clung to his arm and her eyes held his with a steady glow.

"You are Jim Dumont, then!" she breathed. "He warned me against you, against being friends with you! Jim, it wasn't hardly fair, was it?"

"What's fair in love?" he demanded roughly, and kissed her.

"Oh!" she gasped.

And then Sam Langdon came stalking through the darkness, growling like an angry grizzly.

"Belle," he said harshly, "get yore things! We're goin' home. You've made a fool of yoreself, an' of me, this night! An' I'd warned you, too. As for you—you spawn of—of—"

"Careful, Colonel," said Jim softly. "It ain't necessary to call names. I know what you're thinkin'. But I tell you it's foolish, this thinkin' of yores! Belle an' me, well, we just got to be friends!"

"You git away from me before I lose holt of myself complete!" said Langdon tersely. "An' remember, you're not to pester my girl. I'll have no truck with any of Dumont's breed! Git goin'!"

And Jim, not wishing trouble with Belle looking tragically on, turned on his heel, bowed low to the girl, touched her icy fingers once, and was gone. Striding away in the darkness, his young shoulders were very stiff and straight, and his young heart was very hot and full. Nor did he return to the dance. But he got his horse and rode away, covering many long miles until at last, with dawn's pink fingers pulling the darkness from the sky, he dismounted at the D-in-a-Box corral from a leg-weary horse.

"I've been hearin' things, Jim," said his uncle later that day.

"You needn't name 'em," returned the cowboy grimly. "I heard plenty last night."

The older man laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sayin' only that I'm sorry, boy. A full-grown man is a damn fool to hold a grudge the way Sam Langdon does."

Understanding deepened between the two Dumonts as the days passed, and the older man told Jim many things, none of which quite explained the senselessly protracted quarrel.

Two strong men, arrogant and proud in their youth and willfulness, had quarreled over a water hole which neither owned. So began something that grew in bitterness until only the coming of the law into the country which had been lawless, prevented bloodshed.

The Dumont-Langdon feud took the course of constant fighting over rangelands and water rights, kept just within the law more by chance than otherwise, with the threat of gunplay ever near and likely to become a reality. Now this same quarrel, even more senseless through age than in the beginning, bade well to ruin two young lives—or so Jim Dumont thought.

"It ain't reasonable nor fair!" he vowed. "You've seen how wrong it is. Why can't that pig-headed ol' rannigan see?"

Tom Dumont smiled sadly. "I could have shook hands with him many times, Jim, an' it would have saved us both money an' bitterness. But he's stubborn. An' he hates the name of Dumont, although I reckon if he was asked sudden he couldn't tell why exactly. It's got to be a sort of habit."

But the habit was strong. Jim's one attempt at calling on his lady, in the outright fashion of his outright nature, met with rebuff and all but ended in gunplay.

He rode away sullenly, chewing the cud of his temper, while Belle clung to her father's arm and begged Jim to hurry. After that he kept away from the Lazy L, not out of personal fear but because he did not want to make things harder for Belle.

They met, of course, but always elsewhere. Once or twice in town, by accident, when they were able to exchange a few precious and never to be forgotten words. Once or twice on the open range, and on the trail which alone was common between the Lazy L and the D-in-a-Box; the trail that led down from the mesa to the lowlands where Canyon lay. But Jim's suggestion for secret meetings was not well received.

"No," said the girl, looking at him straight. "I won't go behind his back. I'm not a sneak. Next year I'll be of age, and then, perhaps— But I don't know, even then—"

He looked at her miserably. He never touched her now; he did not dare. Looking at her, hearing her voice, was all that he could bear, knowing the barrier that stood between them.

"How can any girl as sweet an' fine as you have such an obstinate ol' heburro for a dad?" he mused. "I reckon I'd better pull up stakes an' drift away."

Swiftly she laid her hand on his arm, which trembled at her touch. "You mustn't call him names, Jim," she said, trying to smile. "And I can't bear to think of you going away!"

The trembling left him then and for a moment he stood rock still, hardly breathing. When he did breathe he took her in his arms, and she clung to him, and for a while all bitterness ceased to exist, as did time and life itself.

"You love me!" muttered Jim, unbelievingly. "It just doesn't seem possible, Belle!"

Standing on tiptoe, with her arms tight about his neck, she kissed him on the mouth, and he felt her trembling now, and it filled him with awe, and patience.

"You won't go, Jim? Tell me you won't!"

"Never, Belle! Only"—wistfully he smiled at her—"only let me see you sometimes. Let us have minutes like this!"

That was foolish, for of course there never could be another minute just like that one. But Belle nodded, and told him that somehow she'd find a way to see him, even if it meant going against her father's will.

"But I don't like going behind his back," she said again, slowly.

"Tell him straight out, then," said Jim. "Even a father's rights are limited, I reckon. Yore life is yore own, Belle."

Only too rarely did she find ways to meet him. Never could he win her consent to regular trysts at appointed times. And perhaps each meeting gained a little sweetness because of that, since each was in the nature of a surprise.

Whether or not she spoke to her father about him, Jim did not know and never asked. They found it better not to mention the old senseless quarrel during their precious moments together.

"What do you aim to do, boy?" asked Tom Dumont once.

Jim shrugged his wide shoulders hopelessly. "I don't know. I reckon even after Belle is of age she won't want to go against him flat."

Tom Dumont looked thoughtful. "I tried to talk sense to him in town today," he confessed, with a wry grin. "He'd have shot me if Hollis hadn't grabbed him. The ol' fool!"

"Better let him be," advised Jim. "Maybe somethin' will break."

But what could happen to make peace where no peace was desired? That quarrel, that feud, was the biggest thing in Sam Langdon's life. Even Belle's pleadings only served to make him the more stubborn.

"I don't mention it any more," she told Jim one day when they met by chance on the trail to town. "He threatened last time not to permit me to leave the Lazy L range alone. When I told him I was going to town to-day he'd have come along, if something hadn't prevented, just to make sure that I didn't meet you!"

"It was my good luck that you did," returned Jim. "I was fixin' the windmill at the Oaks an' needed two bolts, or I'd not have been along here."

They rode homeward slowly, their horses poking along at a lazy walk, hoofs kicking up puffs of powdery dust.

The trail led along the edge of a bluff, then twisted sharply up in the first of the long climb to the top of the mesa. Junipers studded the slopes, brushed their legs as they rode along, side by side. Tall cedars reared there occasionally, and outcroppings of weathered rock thrust through the light soil. It was a rugged beautiful country which Jim Dumont had come to love. A country where discord amongst men seemed the most futile of things.

At the top of the slope, where the level floor of the mesa spread, drab colored in the dry season, the trail forked. The left branch led to the D-in-a-Box, along the side of a three-strand fence; and the right bore away towards the Lazy L. Both forks skirted the edge of the mesa for a distance.

Jim turned to the right, to ride a piece with the girl. He would go as far as the fence where the trail entered Lazy L land. There was a thicket of aspens at this point, huddled about a water hole and a line shack, now seldom used. As they neared the aspens Jim, looking ahead, saw a saddled horse standing half concealed by the slim trees.

"Someone is waitin' for you, Belle," he said, and started to turn back, thinking it would be Langdon.

Just then the waiting horse shifted around a bit, scenting them, and he saw that it bore a strange brand and a Mexican rig. He eased his reins, let his own horse move on, while Belle wondered openly who might be the owner of the riderless animal.

Then, in the depths of the thicket something glinted in the sunlight. In a flash Dumont jumped his horse in between Belle and the glint, jabbed sharply with his spurs and charged headlong into the aspens.

The waiting horse reared upward and snorted. The aspens crashed about the cowboy. He reined back sharply. A darting figure squirmed out almost under his horse's feet. Like a leaping catamount Jim left the saddle. His hand grabbed for, clutched, the collar of a shirt. He flung the darting one back.

"What you doin' here?" he growled, looking down at a scrawny, swarthy, monkey-faced man, whose beady eyes showed hate and fear.

The scrawny one gripped a rifle, but the surprise of Jim's descent prevented its use until the cowboy ripped it away from him. And then, as Belle, her eyes alight, came up, another horseman crashed through from the far side of the aspen thicket.

"What the hell are you doin' here, Dumont?" roared Sam Langdon. "Git off my land!"

"I'm not on yore land," returned Jim calmly. "But this greaser was set to drill someone on t'other side of these aspens. Like as not you might know who he was gunnin' for!"

He dropped the monkey-faced one like a bundle of rags at Langdon's feet, but still held the rifle. The old cattleman stared at the swarthy breed, stared at Dumont, stared at Belle, opened his mouth to speak.

But before he could utter a word the scrawny breed moved with the speed of greased lightning. He grabbed the rifle from Jim's careless grip, darted under the nose of Jim's horse, reached his own animal and was off, clinging like a rat to the saddle. Langdon bellowed a startled oath and swung up his six-gun.

"Hold it!" rasped Jim, knocking up his arm.

The gun roared, making the horses jump. But the bullet missed the mark, and the fleeing breed was below the edge of the mesa. Langdon turned with a snarl of rage.

"You danged fool! You spoiled my aim! That Arcado hombre was gunnin' for me! I shoulda killed the rat!"

"An' swung for it," observed Jim grimly. "Hog-tie that temper, ol'-timer, or it'll sure get you into trouble yet."

Langdon choked, sputtered, but holstered his gun. He glared furiously at the cowboy, who looked back at him calmly.

"Belle, you've been ridin' with this—this skunk again! Haven't I told you I won't have it? By damn, you ain't too big to tan, an' I've a mind to do it!" the old man said.

Dumont stepped nearer, laid his hand firmly on the older man's shoulder, gripped hard in spite of Langdon's backward jerk.

"If you lay a hand on Belle," said Jim quietly, "I'll end yore quarrelsome days, so help me! You ol' fool, you've got nothin' against me except that I'm related to a man you don't like. An' I'll bet two bits, Mex, that you don't know what yore row is all about, at that! It started so long ago you've lost count of everythin' except yore hate.

"I've heard tell that a man has got a certain amount of spite an' meanness in him by nature, an' I reckon all of yores is centered on Tom Dumont! An' you've sure kept it growin' strong! Well, don't figger you're goin' to spoil Belle's life just because of that ingrowin' spite!"

Langdon's eyes blazed into Jim's for a moment, then dropped. He moved his shoulders and the cowboy released his grip. And then without another word or even a glance at Belle, he turned and rode away. The two young people stared after him, then looked blankly at each other.

AFTER that day it seemed that Jim's luck left him altogether. Ranch work had descended upon him, cutting down his hours of leisure. He was foreman of the D-in-a-Box, and his uncle left the management of the big ranch almost entirely to him. When he did have any spare moments they brought him only loneliness and increasing heartache and despair.

Belle seemed to have dropped out of his life. No word came from her; he caught no sight of her in town, on the trail, or out on the range.

Once, just to reassure himself that she was still in the country, he rode to the highest point of the D-in-a-Box range, taking with him a pair of field glasses, and looked long and steadily towards the Lazy L. His reward was a glimpse of Belle, moving listlessly around near the corral. It only increased the strength of his yearning for her, and his bitterness. It seemed to prove that Langdon had exacted her promise to remain at home, never to see him again.

A reminder of the incident in the aspens was the continued presence of the half-breed, Arcado, in and about Canyon. Whenever Jim rode to town he was sure to see the swarthy chap, scowling hate from beady eyes, but keeping well out of reach.

Yet Arcado need not have been so careful. The cowboy had other things to think about; the breed for him was only the prick of a bitter memory. Once only did Jim give the man any real attention, and that was one day when Tom Dumont accompanied him to town and Arcado slunk past them as they tied their horses to the hitch-rail.

"Whatever did you do to that breed, Jim, to make him scowl at you like that?" wondered the older man.

"Kept him from pluggin' yore friend Langdon," muttered Jim bitterly. "Reckon I interfered with Providence that time!"

The elder Dumont looked at him sharply. "To save a man's life is nothin' to regret, boy. But watch out for that greaser. His kind are treacherous."

The cowboy shrugged his shoulders and jerked up the slip knot which fastened his reins to the rail. He could see no reason to fear anything from Arcado. He carried in his heart a

wound deeper and harder to bear than any that could be inflicted by knife or bullet.

"It's right funny to hear you call Langdon a man," he growled.

"I've never doubted he was that," returned his uncle quietly. "But he sure is a stubborn old jackass, too!"

Right then it had to be that Sam Langdon walked out of the store in front of which they stood, and it was apparent that he had heard at least that last remark.

Both Dumonts stiffened; the younger with fierce resentment; the elder out of habit. For a moment it seemed that Langdon would ignore them. But habit is strong. His lean, aged and temper-lined face twisted, hardened. His eyes blazed.

"Was you referrin' to me, Tom Dumont?" he rasped.

Dumont smiled thinly, answered softly. "I said you was a stubborn jackass, Sam, yes! If you hadn't been, you wouldn't have held yore grudge so long."

They were standing face to face, at arm's length. The younger man, caught fast in his own bitterness, was slow to move, slow to step between. His uncle seemed so calm, so well controlled. With near contempt he thought that Tom Dumont was ready to back down, to shake the hand of his lifelong foe.

And then, in a flash, Langdon struck. It wasn't much of a blow; it was too quickly delivered by too angry a man, unskilled in the use of his fists. But it landed on Tom Dumont's mouth and knocked him staggering. And as he staggered surprise was swept from his face by wrath. The habit of a lifetime asserted itself. He caught his balance, and with it the gun from the holster at his hip.

Like a hurtling rocket Jim Dumont flung himself at Sam Langdon. His charge caught the older man crouching, with drawn gun. They crashed together, went down just as a six-gun roared. The second roar sounded as they struck the plank sidewalk. Tom Dumont's bullet thudded into the thick adobe walls of the store, while Langdon's went harmlessly skyward. Langdon himself lay gasping, flat on his back, when Jim hoisted himself up.

The street was filled with men now. They caught Tom Dumont by the arms and took his gun away. They lifted the winded Langdon to his feet and took his gun away. And then Sheriff Togart appeared and took possession of the two weapons and spoke sternly.

"You two ol'-timers should have better sense than to start gunnin' thataway. I'll hold yore weapons at my office until you leave town. Likewise, if you make any more moves like this, I'll jail you both, by Gawd!"

Jim Dumont, standing at the edge of the circle around the two old enemies, brushed the dust from his knees, looked warily from one irate face to the other. His uncle, he saw, was geting hold of his temper once more. But not so Sam Langdon.

"Leave me go!" snarled the owner of the Lazy L. And his arms were freed. Without a weapon there could be no harm in that.

He stalked three steps toward Dumont and stopped, head thrust forward, hands clenching and unclenching, lean body trembling.

"I was most ready to call quits with you, Dumont," he rasped. "Most ready to believe I mighta been wrong all these years in thinkin' of you as a low-down, ditch-skulkin' skunk! But I see better now! You've insulted me again, an' drawed a gun on me. Well, come a-shootin' next time!"

Whipping about he strode away through the crowd that parted before him. Tom Dumont raised his voice.

"Langdon, wait! You're wrong—"

That was wrong, as Jim Dumont knew. It will never do to call an angry man wrong to his face, and expect him to take it. Jim gripped his uncle's arm, silenced him. And Langdon went on through the crowd that opened before him, closed after him.

The two Dumonts finished their bus-

iness in town quickly, and rode homeward as soon as possible. They saw no more of Langdon, but as they passed by Jim noticed the monkey-faced Arcado spying at them from the corner of a building. He did not call his uncle's attention, however, and neither man spoke until they dismounted at the corral at home.

"I reckon I played hell," said Tom Dumont then, grimly.

Jim shook his head. "No. You played the cards you had. I reckon Fate is dealin' from the bottom of the deck, that's all."

DAYS dragged endlessly into interminable weeks. Still no word from Belle, and Jim ate out his heart in longing for her. The dry season came, and the stock was moved nearer the springs, away from the shrunken water holes that were no more than puddles now.

The cowboy spent long hours riding, riding; attending to details of ranch work which might have been looked after by any of the hands as well. A grass fire on the upper range caused an interval of strenuous activity. Then again the humdrum; it was maddening, and unending. He set his teeth in bitterness and a yearning loneliness such as he had never known.

Tom Dumont seemed to have aged since the last quarrel with Langdon. He became more silent than ever; thoughtful; given to long hours alone with an unlighted pipe on the ranch house porch. His eyes, sad and wise with understanding, followed Jim with odd intentness as the younger man went about on manufactured errands. Then one morning, after Jim had ridden away, Tom caught up a horse, saddled it and started down the trail alone.

On this same day hunger for the sight of Belle and the sound of her voice became unbearable for Jim. He rode listlessly, knowing that the work he had laid out for himself to do might as well be done the next day, or the next week, or never. And suddenly, on finding himself well over towards the Lazy L fence, he turned his horse in that direction, cut the wire and went through, and mended the break behind him. His face was a grim mask when he remounted, but his heart was beating in his throat and his eyes glowed with a mad sort of light.

"Can't stand it any more," he muttered. "I'll see her; tell her good-by an' head out of this country! Maybe if I get far enough away I can forget."

But he knew that he could never forget. Only in distance he might find some measure of relief from the constant yearning that came of being so near to the girl and so completely shut off from her.

He thought vaguely of Mexico, where a new revolution was rumored to be brewing. Or perhaps he might go further south, to Argentine or Brazil. New lands, new faces. A different kind of life. He rode on as grimly as if on an errand of vengeance. Saying good-by would be hard, but it would be easier than going on this way.

The mesa top was almost level, rolling but slightly in low mounds, broken now and then by old buffalo wallows, dotted here and there with sage, mesquite and juniper. But there was little to obstruct the view, even at a distance, from the Lazy L ranch buildings, and he rode steadily towards them.

None of the Lazy L riders seemed to be on that part of the range to-day. He saw no one moving in any direction. At the top of one low mound he reined in and for a long time stared moodily at the still distant house, from the chimney of which arose a pale column of smoke, straight in the still air. He started his horse down the slope.

When again he came to the top of a low mound his horse stopped of its own accord. Jim brooded on the mission that was his. Unseeingly he stared at the ranch house, picturing it clearly across the distance. It was a rambling frame structure of many wings, surrounded on three sides by a wide ver-

anda. It was one of Langdon's eccentricities to build of wood in a country of adobe.

Jim Dumont peered at the house gloomily, and then suddenly he came awake, straightened sharply in the saddle with a muffled cry. There was more smoke now than came from the single chimney. Smoke in dense clouds was rising towards the sky. Flames were creeping up the side, across the roof of the old house! With a jab of his spurs Jim sent his horse lunging forward in a mad run.

The fire leaped up as he sped towards it. The flames raged with a fury that spoke of utter destruction. The whole of the sun-dried building seemed to have burst into flames at once. It burned like a tar barrel. And not a soul appeared anywhere about the place! That fact struck cold fear into the cowboy's heart. Desperately he drove his flying horse, faster, faster! The distance between seemed endless. And still the flames soared higher, hotter. The roar of them was like the growl of a savage beast.

He rode straight at the burning house until his horse snorted, reared, whirled. He slid from the saddle then and ran forward, limping on his high heels. He did not notice the horsemen who were racing across the mesa from two directions now, but he did see a brown shape scuttle down towards the corral where a saddled horse pranced and snorted. Flames were creeping up the side of the bunkhouse now, proof of another fire kindled. And that scuttling shape was Arcado, the monkey-faced half-breed!

A wild yell made Arcado redouble his speed. Jim swerved after him, jerking out his gun. Arcado reached his snorting horse, scrambled into the saddle while the frightened animal reared and lunged.

Jim fired, the bullet kicking dust under the prancing hoofs. Straight up the horse reared, and as it came down Arcado shot. The bullet slashed across the cowboy's shoulder, drawing blood like the slash of a knife. It was too high to stop him. He ran on, paused, fired again—once, twice! Something thudded against his side, jolted the wind from him, sent him spinning half around. He caught himself, raised his gun again, saw Arcado's horse give a convulsive leap, and crash down.

The scrawny breed fell free. Like a catamount Jim leaped forward. A scream from the burning house stopped his onrush like a bullet through the head.

Forgotten, of no account, was the half-breed. The cowboy whirled, ran straight for the blazing house. And his heart was sick as he ran, and lead dragged at his legs. It was Belle who had screamed. Belle caught somewhere within the flaming furnace of the house! With his arms lifted before his face he flung himself through the sheet of fire that blocked the open door.

Smoke choked him, blinded him. Flames darted at him, singed his hair, his eyebrows; set his clothes on fire. He staggered on, groping with outstretched hands, uttering croaking, strangled cries. Through the kitchen he lurched, crashed against a wall, slid along it, toppled through a door. He caught his balance, and staggered on.

"Belle! Belle! Where are you, Belle?" His smoke-strangled cry had sounded above the roar of the flames.

"Jim! Here I am! Tied in this chair!"

His groping hands found her, fumbled with the rope that held her there, helpless, at the mercy of the flames. He tried to get his knife, dropped it, groaned, reeled, lungs bursting.

Blood ran from his two wounds. Smoke choked him. Fire scorched him. But somehow he managed to drive his failing body to one more effort. He lifted the girl, chair and all, and staggered back the way he had come.

How he managed it he never knew. From the time he lifted Belle and turned towards the burning door he seemed to lose track of everything.

But his will to do outlasted consciousness.

Somehow he clung to the girl and went on through smoke and fire and heat and the clutching fingers of death. And at the last he reeled out through the sheet of fire into the open air, where he dropped like a log, a burned, bleeding wreck, more dead than alive. But his fingers still gripped the chair, and Belle's arms were around his shoulders.

When he opened his eyes he was puzzled at the stiffness of his body. His arms and legs refused to move when he bade them. He turned his head impatiently, and looked into the troubled face of Belle Langdon. Somehow the flames had done little damage to her face, because he had carried her, unwittingly, face down, with his own body shielding her. But what impressed him in that first look at her was that she was crying. And she slipped to her knees beside him and slid her arm under his bandaged head.

"What's the idea of cryin'?" he asked.

Then he remembered. It all came back to him in a rush, and he tried to sit up, to get up. But Belle pushed him back, smiling through her tears. And she answered the questions he could not quite ask.

"Everything is all right, Jim. I'm not nearly so badly burned as you.

"It was Arcado. He must have hung around until everyone else had gone. Even the cook went to town. And then he sneaked in and before I knew it he had a rope around my neck, choking me. He gagged me, tied me in that chair, and started the fire. I chewed through the gag—and then you came!

"It was his revenge, Jim. Dad had him arrested a few years ago for stealing horses, and he was just out of jail."

"Did he get away?" asked Jim, wondering at the thickness of his voice, and wondering, too, how he happened to be in his own room.

"No. When our boys and Dad and your uncle came, they found him lying almost under his dead horse. He's in jail, not badly hurt."

After that for a long moment neither of them spoke. Some of the old hopelessness seized Jim. After all, what was the use? He'd saved her, and he was glad. He'd give his life for her that moment. Only he should not have lived on after saving her.

"I was on my way to tell you good-by, Belle," he said. "That's how I happened to get there in time. I'm glad I got you out!"

"Good-by!"

It was a whisper, a breath. He did not look at her.

"That's it. Good-by! I can't go on the way things have been. I—I love you too much, Belle! I've got to go, as soon as I can travel."

Not a sound came from the girl for so long that, against his will, he did look at her. She was smiling over him.

"Maybe it would be easier to say it now," he mumbled.

Then his heart seemed to stop beating and his breath stuck in his throat. Gently she leaned down and kissed his eyes, as lightly as the touch of a bird's wing. And when he opened his eyes again he saw, standing behind her, two men. The fact that they stood together, their arms linked and that they smiled at him, made him blink.

"Young man," said the voice of Sam Langdon clearly. "Young man, that was a brave thing you did. You proved that a Dumont can be a man. You brought me back my girl after that devil had started to burn her. You opened my eyes, that day and the other one when you called me to my face. And I've got a friend now where I'd thought only to have an enemy. Likewise, boy, anything I've got is yores for the askin'. So you get yoreself well an' stop talkin' foolish about goin' away! Where would you go, huh?"

It was Belle who answered.

"I'll not let him go anywhere, Dad. He's mine!"

Cupid, Cars and Clara

By Stephen Payne

Here are two lovers, wandering down a path of dreams together. A substantial shadow lies across their way an instant, but Dan Cupid winks mischievously and takes them round a detour. So wedding bells ring merrily just the same.

"YO-HO, Mamie! Yo-ho!" called Billy Weston, reining up his sleek bay pony in front of the unpainted frame house at the Flagler ranch.

"Coming, Billy," came the joyous answer, and a girl stepped out onto the low-railed porch. In Billy's eyes she was not merely "a" girl; she was a dark-haired, brown-eyed beauty whose cheeks reminded him of wild roses in deep mountain canyons, whose figure brought back memories of deer seen at twilight in green parks among leafy trees.

Her gaze rested on the sun-bronzed young man, who sat his bay horse with nonchalant ease, a large white hat in his right hand. His clear blue eyes were expressive of—well, Mamie Flagler knew what they expressed; and any discerning older person who had seen the two would have smiled reminiscently, thinking, "Kids in love."

"Did the boss of the D Bar give you the day off?" asked Mamie. "I know he must have, for your new green shirt and your gorgeous white neckerchief tell me so. And now we can go—"

"To the dance at Jack Pickens' ranch?" Billy supplemented. "You bet we can. I came here early to tell you so. I'm going on to Pivot and hire a car, a real automobile, to take the bestest girl in the world to that hop all proper."

"Oh, that will be grand!" cried the girl. "We'll go in style, and—"

"What's all this?" cut in a voice, high-pitched and nasal. Much of the joy faded from Billy's eyes as his gaze went past Mamie to rest upon a sparse, elderly woman who had appeared in the open door. Spectacles on her bony nose and gray hair tied in a wispy knot on top of her head, added to the severity of her face; while her dress was Puritan in its plainness.

"How do, Miss Flagler?" said Billy politely. "Or should I say 'Aunt Clara,' since I'm pretty nigh one of the family?"

"Humph! Are you?" returned Aunt Clara. "I call that a ridiculous statement." She gazed reproachfully over her glasses at the girl. "Mamie, does this cowboy mean that he has actually proposed?"

The girl's face was the color of the Colorado sunset among the high Rockies and she made no reply.

"Aunt Clara," Billy blurted, "I ain't popped the question yet, if that's what you mean, but I sure intend to."

"It *is* exactly what I mean, though I do not care for the way *you* express it. William Weston, I overheard you saying you were going to hire an automobile to take Mamie to the dance. And, I must say that for a young man who is contemplating marriage and earning not more than forty dollars a month, I consider this idea of hiring an automobile an uncalled-for extravagance."

"But, Miss Flagler, I—this is a doggone—I mean, this is one mighty particular occasion," Billy protested.

"Particular or not makes no difference," returned Aunt Clara Flagler. "Mamie's father, my own dear brother, always got along very nicely with horses and rigs of one kind and another, and so have Mamie and I since his death. I have no patience with people of small means who squander money. We have horses; a buggy, a spring-wagon, a mountain wagon. You may take your choice of any of these. But I consider it necessary, William Weston, to put my foot down upon this extravagance you propose."

"Uh, I say—" began Billy, gazing helplessly at Mamie, who everyone in Pivot County knew, had been dominated by her Aunt Clara ever since the death of her father, at which time Miss Flagler had been appointed Mamie's guardian and had taken her charge to the Flagler ranch.

"Young man," Aunt Clara resumed, "if you wish to get along with me you will do as I say. I have turned most of our horses on the range to save pasture, but on Deer Creek Flats you will find the black team, Kate and Dan."

Mamie, sighing quite audibly, received a second reproachful look to which she sadly answered, "I guess the auto ride is off, Billy. Yes, you'd better get the team."

"Mamie," said Aunt Clara, "why do you call him 'Billy'? Billy is such a—"

"Good name!" ejaculated Mamie.

"—such a common sort of name," continued her aunt. "William, your expression might lead me to think your disposition is not as pleasant as I had hoped. I think rigid discipline in regard to money matters will be good for you."

Miss Flagler turned and moved grandly back into the house, her body as erect as a pine tree.

"Doggone!" sputtered the cowboy. "I could—"

"Go after the team, Billy. I—I'm going to cry," choked Mamie, and ran into the house.

Young Weston jammed his hat on his head and jerked it down savagely. Turning his pony he spurred it almost viciously as he loped away, not toward Pivot, but toward Deer Creek Flats. He was abreast of the Flagler ranch corrals when he noted that a man doing some repair work was a new hand. Miss Flagler employed only one hired man and not one ever stayed long. Billy reined up.

"How d'yuh like your job?" the puncher inquired gruffly, for he was feeling gruff and cross and thought he would rather enjoy picking a quarrel with this hired man or almost anybody. It would be "swelligant" to get into a fight right now.

"Purty good," replied the hand, an oldish, gangling fellow with a brown beard.

"'Purty good,' huh? Does the—uh—old rip-snorter give yuh anything to eat?"

"Younker," said the hand, "if them insultin' words of your'n has reference

to Miz Clara Flagler, yuh've got me to lick right now."

"Well, ain't that swelligant! Pull off your jumper, an' get that clawhammer outa your hip pocket. I'll give you the daggondest thumpin' yuh ever had."

The brown-bearded man stared intently at the cowboy. "On second thought, I'm pullin' in my horns."

"Aw, gosh darn it!" growled Billy disgustedly.

"What's chawin' on yuh anyhow?" inquired the hand.

"Nothin', nothin' a-tall. So you like your job? How much wages yuh gettin'?"

"Miz Flagler said she'd give fifteen a month, an' after I found out she owned this place I took her up."

"You took her up? Why?"

"Wal, so far as I could l'arn there wasn't nobody a-courtin' of Miss Flagler and this yere is one nice little ranch."

Billy's loud snort made his pony think another horse had made the snort, and snorting itself, it leaped ahead. The cowboy let the animal go, and some minutes later laughed mirthlessly.

"Can yuh beat that? That duffer thinks he can win Aunt Clara and her ranch! He's sure an opportunist or an optimist or both— Hum? Say, if one duffer considers the old rip-snorter worth courtin', somebody else might, too. Somebody with the qualifications she likes."

Thoughtfully Billy rode out to the flats, where presently he located the black team, Kate and Dan, in a bunch of other horses. Looking at them for a few minutes through rebellious eyes, he shook his head decisively and rode on in the direction of Pivot.

An hour later he tied his horse to a hitch-rail on the main street of the thriving little cowtown, and ascended a set of stairs leading to offices above a pool-hall, where he rapped on a door labeled "John W. Sykes, Attorney at Law."

John W. was a newcomer to Pivot whom Billy had never met. The door was opened by a portly little chap of forty-five or so with a very bald head, who said he was Sykes and inquired what he could do for the cowboy.

Billy twisted his hat in his hands and looked intently at a paper lying on the lawyer's table—a copy of a matrimonial gazette.

"What can I do for you, sir?" repeated the lawyer.

"When does a girl get old enough so she's her own boss?"

"That depends on the state of which she is a citizen."

"How 'bout this state?"

John W. consulted a book and announced, "In this state a girl becomes of age at eighteen."

"Well, she's old enough, all right, but I guess she wouldn't go ag'in the old Tartar's wishes."

"Ah, I seem to scent a romance," chuckled the lawyer, glancing toward the paper on his table. "It might interest you to know I'm quite sympathetic."

"Uh—bachelor?"

"Unfortunately, yes. A lonely existence. In something of desperation I was glancing through this agency's sheet before you came in. If one could find a congenial companion not too old, preferably with some means—"

"Partner, you got a car?"

"Sorry to say I have not. My business has not been such that—"

"Never mind. I'll hire the car and you come with me." Billy jumped up, his chaps rustling and his spurs jingling as he crossed to the door.

"Just a minute. You might explain." John W. prided himself that nothing could astonish him, but this cowboy certainly did.

"There's an—eh—an unmarried lady that lives on a ranch she owns, with a couple of hundred cows and a lot of horses t'boot. Mr. Sykes, I figger it might pay yuh to get 'quainted with her."

"A ranch and two hundred cows?" exclaimed the lawyer. "Lead on, cowboy!"

Billy thought exultantly, "That old rip-snorter probably ain't never had a love affair in her whole life. This John W. talks her language, and if I can just get her romanced up about him, won't she kinder change her tune toward me and Mamie and lay offen us?"

The cowboy stabled his horse in Pivot and rented a car at the nearest garage, demanding a roadster, for he did not want an auto with more than one seat.

"John W. Sykes will entertain the old rip-snorter while I take Mamie to the dance," thought Billy. "And a one-seater will prevent that pair from going with us. Humph! Every place I've ever took Mamie yet, Aunt Clara has always gone along. I ain't liked it none and I've been hoorawed plenty 'bout it, too."

On the ride out to the Flagler ranch the lawyer expressed curiosity concerning the lady he was to meet, but Billy added nothing to what he had already said. At five o'clock the hired roadster rattled to a halt near the porch, where earlier that day Billy had been warned to refrain from extravagance.

No one answered the cowboy's knock at the living room door, but he heard the sound of a churn going in the kitchen. Thinking the someone turning that churn would be Aunt Clara, he led the lawyer around to the kitchen door and, too late to back out, saw it was Mamie who was churning.

"Miss Flagler, meet Mr. Sykes," said Billy.

John W. doffed his hat gallantly, stepped forward and grasped Mamie's hand. "Well, well," he said, "and where have you been all my life? Beautiful place you have here," he enthused, while Billy scowled.

"Our mutual friend," the lawyer continued, indicating the cowboy, "has been singing your praises all the way from Pivot. But he did not say half enough nice things. He didn't tell me you were young and beautiful—*beautiful!*"

"Billy," John W. addressed the cowboy, "you've sprung something of a surprise on me. I'm more than charmed, more than delighted. In fact my spirits are soaring. Ha, ha!"

Mamie gazed perplexedly at the effusive lawyer and at Billy, who burst out: "Hey, wait a minute, John W. Let's get this business straight. Mamie ain't—well—"

He broke off lamely as a step sounded at the door and Aunt Clara stamped into the kitchen. She stopped and transfixed Billy with a glare. "Where's your saddle horse?"

"In town."

"In town! Pivot? Where's the team you were to get?"

"Aunt Clara, let me introduce—"

"The team, Dan and Kate! Where are they?"

"On the range, ma'am. Miss Flagler, this is—"

"William, did you hire that car I saw in the yard?"

"Indeed he did," cried John W. "Yes, madam, Billy hired the car to bring me out here to meet—your daughter, I presume—" bowing to Mamie. "Madam, I shall be only too happy to be of any service to yourself or your daughter."

"Who are *you?*" inquired the elderly woman of John W. with open hostility.

"John W. Sykes, attorney at law and at your service, madam. Won't you shake hands?"

Miss Flagler showed no inclination to shake hands. Placing a capable hand on each hip, she remarked. "I hate and despise all lawyers. They are no better than crooks. They distort the truth and do all in their power to see that justice is not administered."

John W. cleared his throat. "Um-ah, Billy, you might have given me some warning. I'm beginning to think you've played me something of a trick."

"Your surmise is quite correct, Mr. Sykes," said Aunt Clara. "I've no doubt but what William brought you along with him to act as a buffer. Contrary to my wishes, he has hired a car

and brought you with him, thinking that I would say nothing in the presence of a stranger about this uncalled-for and senseless extravagance."

" 'Twasn't that a-tall," blurted Billy, glancing miserably at Mamie, who stood like one passing through a none too pleasant dream, or something which she hoped was only a dream.

"Indeed, William? If I have not summed up the situation correctly, what is the answer to the car and this lawyer's presence?"

"Well, it was this way," Billy began, and then he stopped. He looked down at his boots and his face felt on fire.

"I'll tell you, madam," exclaimed John W. warmly. "I'll tell you all about it, not sparing myself. This young scamp, practical joker, or whatever he is—"

"Hey, you button your lips!" snapped Billy. "Keep still or I'll wring your doggoned neck."

"What's this, a threat? Keep still? I will not. Mrs. Flagler," John W. bowed slightly to Aunt Clara; "Miss Flagler," bowing low to Mamie, "this young man brought me here to introduce me to an unmarried lady whom he led me to believe might later be induced to marry me. Arrived at this ranch he introduced me to the lady," again bowing to Mamie, "by whom I was very favorably impressed. But Billy Weston did not tell me that the girl's mother despised lawyers and that I should receive such a—um—an inhospitable welcome."

"Billy, Billy, say something!" cried Mamie.

"Be quiet, girl, be quiet," commanded Aunt Clara. Going to the door, she gave a piercing whistle and called: "Henry! Oh, Henry! Come here."

"Yaoop!" came an answer, and a moment later the hired man crossed the yard from the stable to the house on the run. "What is it, Miz Flagler?"

"I thought I might need a little assistance," said Aunt Clara. "You two fellows," snapping her fingers first at the lawyer and then at Billy, "get off this ranch at once; and, Mr. Weston, don't ever come back again."

"I'm going," John W. stepped outside. "Coming, Billy?"

"Not just yet," growled the cowboy. "Mamie, this is a heck of a mix-up, but you and me can straighten it out."

"Are you forgetting what I just told you, William?" said Aunt Clara, coldly and haughtily. "Henry, put him off the ranch."

"Try it, Henry," Billy invited, and Henry shifted uncomfortably.

"If you ladies will withdraw I'll help Henry," shouted John W. "Ho, but won't I!"

Billy grinned with sudden savage delight. "'Tain't necessary for the ladies to withdraw. I'll go with you in the car, John W. Come along, Henry. You're going, too."

"Where?" demanded Miss Flagler.

"To get that beard tore off him," snapped Billy. "I've been needin' an outlet all day and I'll sure enjoy cleaning up on these two roosters at once."

"Henry," cried Aunt Clara, "don't get in that car. I don't care what happens to the lawyer, but don't you go away. Not with that young wild man!"

"I'll do jus' as you say, Miz Flagler," agreed Henry.

Billy had walked out and seated himself in the roadster. "That's a nice boy, Henry," he called. "Come on, John W. We're going for a ride and just as soon as we're outa sight of this house we'll do somethin' besides ride. What you hesitatin' for? Come on."

"Mrs. Flagler," the lawyer said, "couldn't you provide some other means of getting me back to Pivot?"

"You get in that car and get offen here," shouted Henry advancing threateningly towards the attorney.

"You make me!"

The two doubled their fists and squared off at each other.

"Hit him, Henry! Hit him!" cried Aunt Clara. "Hit that fresh lawyer in his stomach!"

"Yes'm," returned the hired man. "If

he makes a pass at me I'll bust him right in the bread-basket."

"And if you hit me," shouted John W., "I'll forget myself and knock the head off a defenseless old man. Don't you hit me, fellow."

"An' don't yuh hit me. Don't yuh dast."

The two stood on guard glaring fearfully at each other. At any other time Billy Weston would have laughed uproariously. He noted that while all of Aunt Clara's attention was upon the two ridiculous old men, Mamie was now gazing at him through a window of the living room.

Slipping out of the car, Billy stole, cat-footed, up onto the porch and entered the living room, where Mamie regarded him with an expression he could not fathom. She was perplexed, to say the least.

"Honey, can't we slip off and go to that dance?" he whispered.

"Billy Weston, did you bring that flowery-talking old fossil here to introduce him to me? Did you tell him what he said you did?"

Hurriedly the cowboy explained what had been his plan. "But the ropes got crossed," he concluded, "and now I'm in bad proper with Aunt Clara. Mamie, dear, run off from her and come to the dance anyhow."

"Billy, I can't do anything against her wishes. You know what she's done for me. It would have been all right if you had done as Aunt Clara said and got the team. Things are in a terrible mess now. I don't know what we'll do, but I do know Aunt Clara has ordered you off the place. She won't relent. You can't come back."

"We'll elope," stated Billy decisively. "Honey, we jus' got to. At eleven o'clock I'll be here to get you. I'll whistle like a night-hawk and you come out with your bag packed—Hello! What the—?"

Out in the yard an engine had suddenly roared. Billy spun about to see John W. Sykes, in the hired roadster, wheel about and speed out of the yard with a clashing of gears, before the cowboy could run half the distance to it. The attorney freed one hand from the wheel and shook his fist at Billy.

"Walk, confound you!" he shouted.

"Hi, you wait and take this other yahoo with yuh," yelled Henry, running after the car which scuttled out through a gate and vanished over a low hill.

Billy and Henry both stopped, regarding each other. "You ran him off all right," drawled the cowboy, mustering a grin.

"Yep, he was minded to arger the matter, but I shore throwed a chill into him."

"You bet you did, Henry!"

"William Weston," sounded a cold voice as Aunt Clara strode towards the two men, "since that scalawag lawyer beat you to the automobile, you can do exactly as he said—walk."

"Aw, please now, Miss Flagler, you know a cowboy can't walk. Surely you'll let me have a horse." Billy essayed a laugh which mocked him hollowly. "You see, this was all a joke—bringing John W. out here. It was just in fun. I never—"

"Walk!" commanded the elderly lady, pointing in the direction taken by the lawyer.

"Auntie, he's all right," cried Mamie, from the living room door. "Please let him have a saddle horse. He can take my pony."

"Mamie, go into the house and close the door. William Weston, are you going to leave this ranch or not?"

"Uh, I guess I'll go."

"Yah, yuh'd better," growled Henry menacingly.

Billy had taken four steps, but he stopped abruptly. "What 'id you say, Henry?"

"Nothin'. Nothin', I didn't say nothin'."

Under any other circumstances the cowboy would have rolled on the ground and shrieked with laughter, but now Billy did not feel at all like laughing. He merely withered the hired man

with a scornful look and walked on. It was nearly ten miles to Pivot, though only five to the D Bar Ranch, where he worked. However, going to the D Bar was out of the question. Although he might lie to the other cowboys, the truth of his predicament—how he came to be afoot, his escapade with the lawyer, the hired car and Miss Flagler—would be sure to be found out. In the parlance of the range, the waddies "would have a horse on Billy." They would ride that horse unmercifully. They would hooraw Billy morning, noon and night.

Nothing for it but to "hoof it" to Pivot, where the cowboy might at least enjoy punching the attorney's nose. If only he had driven in the team as Aunt Clara had directed, all would have been well. But why should he do as Aunt Clara ordered? She had held Mamie under her thumb so long, making the girl jump through the hoop when she cracked the whip, that poor Mamie thought she must obey in all things.

Billy reached the main road and scanned it hopefully for a car or rig going toward Pivot. He saw neither auto nor team, and doggedly resumed his journey. Hours later, when darkness had fallen, he entered the town, where he went first to the attorney's office. But John W. Sykes was not there and the cowboy did not know where to locate him. He would not waste time hunting the lawyer.

However, he did use up considerable time in locating the county clerk. He finally found the official and got what he wanted—a marriage license. Then he repaired to the garage where he had hired the car.

"I want to hire that same car I had again," he told the proprietor.

"You want to hire the same car—*again?*" queried the man, staring at the cowboy.

"Uh-huh. I know how to run it."

"But, fellow, you took it out this afternoon and you haven't brought it back. What did you do with it?"

"Huh? Didn't John W. Sykes bring it in here?"

"No."

"He didn't? Did yuh see him drive through town in it?"

"Nope. Nobody has seen Sykes since he left town with you, Billy."

"Yuh don't say! Frank, if that hombre has stole that roadster, am I responsible?"

"It was you that hired it, Billy. You're responsible for it while it was in your care. That's a clause what's written right into the agreement we have fellows sign before we let out a car. You signed a paper, you know."

"I sure do know. An' I got a kinda gosh-awful s'picion I'm stuck proper—Well, we'll know 'bout that soon. Right now I want to hire another car."

The garage man backed out a coupe and began to fill it with gas and oil, while Billy ran out to locate the sheriff. That officer he found had gone to the Pickens' dance. The cowboy telephoned the Pickens ranch, but the sheriff had not yet arrived. Was there any message? Billy said, "No," and hung up, not caring to have this latest development of his troubles broadcasted.

Wondering if any young man in love ever had quite such a tough time as he was having, Billy sought the minister, to discover that this gentleman also had gone to the Pickens' dance.

"I don't like that a little bit," muttered Billy. "Because even if Mamie is willin' to go through with this deal—which I ain't sure she is—I can't go to the Pickens' ranch to get spliced and have everybody gawkin' at us and joshin' us and pullin' all kinds of pranks."

However, he went back to the garage, got the coupe, and drove out to the Flagler ranch. Leaving the car fully two hundred yards from the buildings, and hoping that the noise of its engine had not aroused the "old rip-snorter," Billy stole toward the house. All was dark within. The cowboy's heart hammered as he imitated the shrill cry of

a night-hawk. Would Mamie come? Was she game? Gee, willickers! She was!

The door opened soundlessly and a feminine figure, much bundled up, and with a dark scarf wrapped about her head, came out and slipped across the porch.

Billy extended one hand and took a heavy bag, while with the other he squeezed her gloved one.

"Bully for you, Mamie," he whispered. "Come on. My car is out yonder."

Still holding that hand he led the way. It was so dark that he could not see his companion's face, but that mattered little. He was enraptured, and as he reached the coupe he kissed the lady before assisting her to the seat. A moment later the motor purred and they were off.

"We've fooled the old rip-snorter this time," exulted Billy. "Aw, I shouldn't have called her that, Mamie. I know you're fond of her — kind of, anyhow. Guess that's what makes you so awful quiet. Why, you ain't said one word."

A slight sound, as of a sob or as if she were about to burst into tears, was Billy's only answer, and he soothed, "There, there. Everything will be all right. And listen close, honey. I've got the license, and the minister is at the Pickens' dance. If you're game we'll go there and just let the people laugh all they want and play all the jokes they want; but we'll get married."

Still no answer, but his companion snuggled a little closer as the cowboy turned the car off the road to Pivot, taking the one to the Pickens' ranch. He was four miles along this road when a front tire blew out and Billy jumped out, to light a match and inspect the damage.

"Bad blow-out," he commented raising the flaming match high. "But we don't mind, do we, honey?" looking at the figure on the seat, who had turned her face away from him and was adjusting the scarf over her head. But she did not get this back in place quite quickly enough and Billy saw her hair, saw her profile.. The match burned his fingers as he ejaculated:

"What the dickens!"

Another match flared in his suddenly trembling hand. "Arough!" he growled throatily, almost too thunderstruck for any speech. Mastering himself, he grated:

"It's you, is it, Aunt Clara! Yuh needn't try to hide now. Yuh've got a sense of humor yourself, ain't yuh? Wouldn't I have cut a pretty figure drivin' up to the Pickens' dance and helpin' you out of this car and leadin' yuh into the lamp light in front of a hundred people afore I got a look at your phiz? Ho, but wouldn't I!"

"I certainly wish that tire had not blown out," snapped Aunt Clara, vehemently. "As a usual thing I never play jokes of any kind, but I cannot imagine anything which would have pleased me more than to have seen your face, William Weston, when you did lead me into the light in front of a big crowd!"

"Thank God I was spared that," Billy strangled. "Arough! And to think I kissed *you!*"

"You should consider that quite a privilege, young man, which very few men have ever had. Well, now that you've found me out, what are you going to do?"

Billy had in a measure regained some of his composure and his thoughts were racing. "Woman," he rumbled, "how the Sam Hill did you find out I was coming for Mamie and what did you do with her?"

"I overheard you ask Mamie to elope, and after you were gone I cornered the girl, telling her she was not to think of doing such an outrageous thing." Aunt Clara replied. "Brazenly she defied me. Mamie defied me!"

"Bully for Mamie! Now, what have you done with her?"

"I do not feel called upon to answer that question. William Weston, I was not going to permit my niece to throw

herself away upon such a fellow as you are, particularly after your disobedience to-day and the most peculiar joke you played on me in bringing that attorney to my ranch.

"With a dark night in prospect, it occurred to me, young man, to play a joke on you, which, if successful, would make you the laughing stock of the county. This, I reasoned, would most effectually break up your romance with Mamie. My own feelings were not considered. I do not enjoy your company nor do I enjoy having you kiss me."

Billy muttered something which sounded profane. Aunt Clara continued, "I repeat that I certainly wish this tire had not blown out—Oh, you're going to fix it?"

"Yes, Miss Flagler. I've had one hell of a time to-day, but I'm going to get some enjoyment out of it yet."

"Are you, indeed?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Billy, swiftly and savagely changing tires. "Since you won't tell me where Mamie is, where's that damn hired man of yours?"

"I discharged the fellow this evening shortly after you and the lawyer had departed. His cowardice at a time when I was expecting him to do something heroic for me was more than I could stand."

"Uh? I'd think it would be. Since he's left, I s'pose he ain't helpin' you to hide Mamie?"

"He left on his saddle horse, yes. If you have that tire fixed, you might look for Mamie at the Pickens' dance."

"I might, but I won't," said Billy shortly. "I told you awhile ago I was going to get some enjoyment out of this situation," he added enigmatically and voiced a low, grim chuckle which was not at all reassuring to Miss Flagler.

He threw the tools into the back of the car, slipped into the seat beside Aunt Clara and started the engine. An instant later he reached over and opened the door on the woman's side, and with a silent, savage delight shoved Miss Clara Flagler out of the car. Throwing the auto into reverse, Billy backed, turned, and shot away back towards the Flagler ranch with the woman's railings fairly burning his ears.

"Walk!" the cowboy yelled back. "Walk! That's what you made me do! But you never thought I'd be so ungentlemanly as to give you a dose of your own medicine. Walk, you old ripsnorter!"

Arriving at the Flagler ranch, Billy found every door to the house locked and received no answer whatever to his shouts. Wondering what Aunt Clara could have done with Mamie and not knowing what to think, he smashed a window and entered. Upon lighting a lamp, he quickly discovered that the trap door leading to the cellar—merely a hole in the ground under the kitchen, with no outside exit whatever—was barricaded with the churn and several bags of flour.

Billy threw aside the sacks of flour and the churn, looked down into the dark hole, and a moment later was assisting Mamie to come up the ladder out of it. She clung to her rescuer, saying, "Auntie asked me to go down there and get some preserves for supper, and—"

"And she slammed the door and weighted it down," growled Billy.

"Where is she now?" inquired the girl.

"Takin' a walk that she ain't enjoyin' none. Game to marry me to-night, Mamie?"

"You know it, Billy!"

"Fine!" Billy did what any husky and normal young lover would have done under like circumstances; then said, "Aw, shucks, we'll have to go to the Pickens' dance to get the minister, and the D Bar cow waddies'll be there, and we'll get razzed and riced and old-shoed. I—uh—"

"What do we care?" asked Mamie practically. "All that nonsense won't hurt us any."

"Honey, I won't have anybody saying you're gamer than I am," cried Billy. "So, let's go."

Miss Flagler, when Billy had left her afoot, had been much nearer the Pickens' ranch than her own home. Therefore, to that ranch she had started, walking very rapidly, for she was in a rapid-fire mood. Now, en route to the Pickens' ranch, and yet some two miles from it, Billy and Mamie came upon a darkly clad, feminine figure on foot, which, upon hearing and seeing the car coming, halted in the middle of the road and waved her scarf in an attempt to stop it.

Billy, however, swerved out into the sagebrush and avoided a collision with Aunt Clara, who said several things about the lovers as they passed on.

At the dance, which was going full swing, were fifty ranchers and their families, an equal number of cowboys, and half the citizens of Pivot. Among these latter Billy noted John W. Sykes, but it was the minister of Pivot whom he and Mamie singled out. He was on the sidelines, watching with undisguised enjoyment feminine and masculine figures whirling to the music of a fast waltz.

As the music for this dance ceased, the minister announced in stentorian tones, "Ladies and gentlemen, a rare treat is in store for all of us to-night. The wedding of Miss Mamie Flagler and Billy Weston. Order, please, and quiet, while I perform the ceremony."

Cheers and hand-clapping followed until Billy could not hear himself think. He knew he would have run away had not Mamie, there beside him, seemed so cool and self-possessed. Came silence while the minister performed the ceremony.

"I pronounce you man and wife," he intoned just as a wild-eyed, elderly lady, with her gray hair flying, rushed in at the door. Her eyes took in all the details of the scene before her, and by some freak of chance the first gentleman she turned toward was the sheriff of Pivot.

"Stop this nonsense, Sheriff!" panted Aunt Clara. "You must stop it!"

The sheriff was a large, raw-boned man, generally quite zealous where his duties were concerned, but on this particular occasion he had had four drinks of Jack Pickens' best whiskey and was looking at all the world as if through rosy-hued spectacles.

"Just keep your shirt on, sister," he replied jovially. "You're a mite too late. The knot has done been tied."

"Well, I never!" gasped Aunt Clara. "Had I no friends to act for me in my absence?"

"You bet you've got friends," whooped the exuberant but woozy sheriff. "Let's dance." And as the music started, he caught Miss Flagler up in his arms and whirled away with her. She hung back and fought him, but he lifted her off her feet and away they went among half a hundred other whirling couples.

While this was going on, Billy and Mamie, surrounded by another part of the crowd, literally fought their way outside to reach their coupe. But several of the D Bar cowboys had found out in which car Billy had driven to the Pickens' ranch, and they had fixed it so that it would not run.

"Whoop! You two will stay here and make a night of it," announced one of the waddies.

Billy neither agreed nor disagreed with this announcement. He was getting a lot of joshing, but he wasn't as annoyed as he'd thought he would be. However, the pranks to be dreaded were those the D Bar cowboys might pull on him later. He whispered a few instructions in Mamie's ear, and she told the crowd she must go to the room where the ladies had left their wraps to fix up her hair and dress.

This was agreeable to Billy's friends, the cowboys, and others who did not intend to let Billy out of their sight. Nevertheless, he managed to give them all the slip, and while they were seeking him in the stable and in the bunkhouse, Billy was peering in through a

window of the dance hall trying to locate John W. Sykes.

Aunt Clara, as Billy noted, seemed to be making the best of what she must consider a crushing defeat, for she was still dancing with the sheriff.

To the cowboy's delight, Sykes finally came out of the dance hall, evidently to enjoy a smoke. Noiselessly Billy stole up behind him and prodded him in the back with his jack-knife.

"I got a gun agin your backbone," growled Billy menacingly. "Not a squawk outa yuh, but lead out to that roadster I hired early to-day."

Beads of perspiration were suddenly visible on John W.'s brow, but he obeyed to the letter, leading the way to the car which he had driven to the Pickens' ranch. In the roadster was Mamie, whom Billy had told to slip out of the window and find this particular car. Billy ordered John W. into the driver's seat, squeezed in beside him, held Mamie on his knees and commanded the attorney to head for Pivot.

The car roared out of the yard, and, too late to stop it, the D Bar cowboys saw it going; but they did not attempt to follow. Midway between the ranch and the town, Billy suddenly snapped:

"Stop, John W.!"

The roadster stopped. "Get out!" was the next command.

"Me get out here?" stammered the lawyer, obeying the pressure of what he believed to be a gun jabbing his ribs.

"Yes! You made me do a sight of walking to-day," rumbled Billy savagely, although he was not feeling very savage now. "Now you do some yourself."

He slid into the seat which had been occupied by John W., and threw in the clutch, but paused a moment to say, "Here's what I made you toe the mark with, Mr. Attorney," showing the pocket knife. "In case you take a notion to have me arrested, Mamie's a witness; and we'd have the horse laugh on you, so you never could face the court."

At the moment John W. Sykes seemed unable to think of anything to say. Billy and Mamie drove on. They were a much longer time than was necessary in reaching Pivot, but Frank, the garage man, was still up.

"You drive out in one car and you come back in another," he said. "I don't know what to think about you—whether it's safe to rent a car to you or not."

"Well, at any rate I'm returnin' the machine I hired first," said Billy. "But what's botherin' me is how to get the second one I hired back to you."

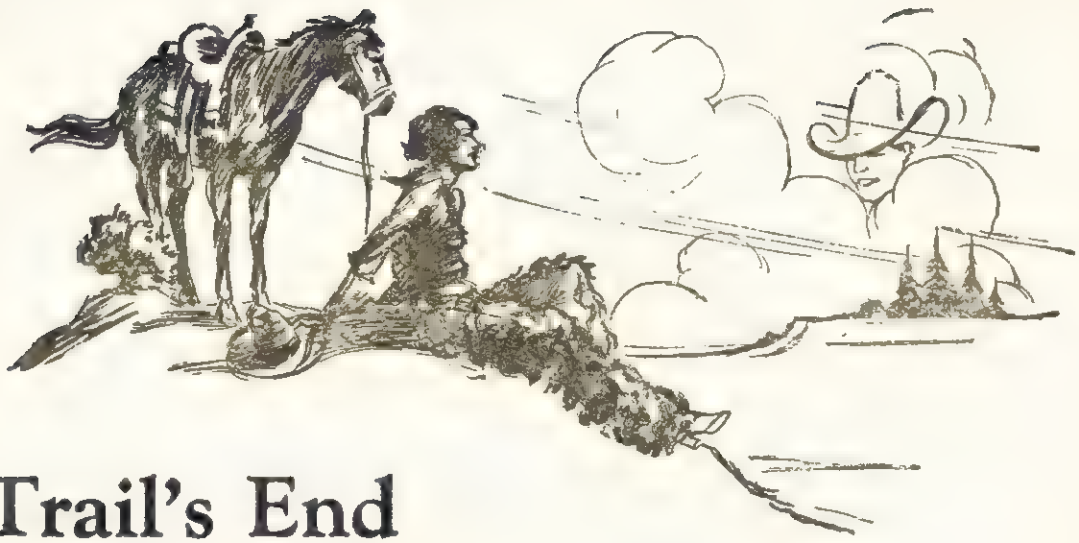
"Where is it?"

"At Jack Pickens' ranch."

"Fine!" exclaimed the garage man. "I didn't have a machine of my own to lend you, Billy, but I had finished a job of repair work on that coupe of Pickens', so I let you have it. Jack'll appreciate having it returned to his ranch."

"Then everything is hunky dory now, Billy," cried Mamie.

"Uh-huh, honey." The cowboy helped the girl from the roadster, and oblivious of the presence of the garage man, held her close.



Trail's End

Watch out, folks, for the next issue of Ranch Romances. We have an announcement to make to all Trail's End members.

We've been deliberating on the scheme proposed to you in the last number. After reviewing carefully the comments made by various fellow members, we have decided to expand our original idea.

So we have worked out a really worth while plan that will give each and every Trail's End member an opportunity to show just how enterprising he or she can be. We know you'll all be interested. The next issue will tell you about it. Don't miss the First February Number!

See the next page for photographs of Trail's End members.

Some Fellow Members

The names of these members appear on page 598.

Join Trail's End

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OUR AIR

OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. The Editor wishes to establish a definite understanding with every reader and be in a position to know what you want and why. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Take a personal interest in its future. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL.

SOLDIERS TWO

Dear Editor:

This is our second attempt to get into Our Air Mail, and I hope we are more successful this time.

Have just finished reading your wonderful magazine and wondered if by any chance you could find us some pen pals and I assure you that we will answer every one of them.

Would like very much to hear from Kathleen Mercer of New York City and Vera Vaughn of Dodge City, Kansas. But don't let this keep the rest of you from writing.

Wishing the R. R. the best of success, we remain:

c/o Second Signal Co. *HAROLD L. SHARE.*
Fort Sam Houston, Texas. *DORAS LASATER.*

SUCCESS TO RANCH!

Dear Editor:

I have written before but would like to again request pen pals. I am still a reader of R. R. I love it just as well.

I am 17 years old, brown hair, gray eyes. Would like very much to have a lot of pen pals. Will answer every letter I get.

Wishing you success,

Miss Esther Vardon, *"LINDY."*
Munising, Mich.

R. R. HAS A PLACE IN HER HEART

Dear Editor:

Your magazine, R. R., has won a corner in my heart but there is one more place there which is calling for pen pals and as I'm sure you can help me by publishing this in the Air Mail of the above mentioned book, I ask you to be so kind and do it. Will you please? Thank you ever so much.

A SINCERE READER.

Miss Mary Keberle,
3460 East 78rd St.,
Cleveland, Ohio.

ADDRESSED TO NEBRASKANS

Dear Editor:

I am going to make another try to enter Our Air Mail department and I hope I am successful this time. I have looked up all the names each time but have found very few writers who have joined from Nebraska. What's the matter Nebr.? Don't you ever write?

I am also going to join the Trail's End Club.

And as for me, I want pen pals, boys or girls and I will answer all who write me.

Now I am seventeen years old, have dark brown hair, blue eyes and I am a junior high school girl. And I do love all kinds of outdoor sports or any other kind of sports.

I am wishing the best magazine in the market great success.

Yours sincerely,

"THE NEBRASKA KID."

Louise Viola Casehall,
Elwood, Nebraska,
Route 1, Box 4.

BLONDES PREFERRED

Dear Editor:

How are the chances of getting a pass to fly into Our Air Mail? I have tried before a few times to be one of the gang, but I just didn't make it. But I will never quit trying.

I have been a reader of the Clayton Magazines for a long time and I still am.

Also, I want some pen pals, blondes, but brunettes are just as good any time.

I have brown hair and blue eyes.

I would like to hear from Velma Spratt, of Yakima, Washington.

Here's hoping R. R. goes on forever.

I remain,

John H. Lehman, *BUDDY OF CALIFORNIA.*
1126 West 76th St.,
Los Angeles, Calif.

A TRAIL'S END MEMBER

Dear Editor:

I've been a long time in letting you know I had received my pin. Thanks, and I certainly do like it. I'm proud to belong to such a club.

Dear readers, I too am lonesome and would love to have some pals. Won't some of you take a little time and drop me a line?

I have blue-gray eyes, chestnut brown hair, curly and bobbed. I like interesting letters and will try hard to send as good as I receive.

Best of luck to the Double R.

Ruth H. Luman, *RUDY.*
1549 Gabriel Ave.,
Parsons, Kansas.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC READER

Dear Editor:

I am a very enthusiastic, ardent and constant reader of your wonderful magazine, Ranch Romances.

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I have written to you several times and have seen none of my letters in print.

Thanking you, I remain,

JAMES J. SEIFERT JR.
83D. F. A. Box Battery "B"
Fort Benning, Georgia.

GANG, WHERE ARE YOU?

Dear Editor:

I take great pleasure in writing you another letter to see if I can get in touch with the gang. Now, dear Editor, I want you to print this letter in your magazine to show the world that I am waiting for some of the Trail's End fellows to write to me. I am only a lonely country boy. Every time I get a copy of Ranch I sit down and read from corner to corner. It gives me a thrill that I can't forget.

I remain a friend of Ranch Romances and all its writers.

Yours truly.
"BANJO EYES."

C. V. S. O.
Raymon Grinstead,
Prairie Lea, Texas.

OUR CHAMPION READER

Dear Editor:

I am your champion reader—none of your other readers can beat me.

I have read your R. R. Mag since it was first published and I sure am a fast reader. Your mag has got them all beaten, believe me. R. R. is my favorite.

I never read any other mag except yours, the R. R.

I am a lover of the West and horses.

I am a young girl, my age will be 20 years in 1930. Have long, light brown hair, and dark gray eyes.

I am a cowgirl and I only had just a little bit of experience in the West.

I want to make friends with your readers. I want to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of my town.

I see in our Air Mail that there is a flying cowboy who wants pen pals. I want to be one of his pen pals. Will he write to me? Also, would like to hear from Lone Wolf John.

From your champion reader.

JESSIE (THE COWGIRL)
Miss Jessie C. Tomko,
309 Olivia St.,
McKess Rocks, Pa.

TROT OUT YOUR PHOTO!

Dear Editor:

This is the third time I have sent R. R. an appeal for pen pals, but I never seem to get printed in your wonderful mag. It's the best ever. I hope everybody snaps out of it (young or old) and writes me a letter. I'll even exchange snapshots, so you better all write.

Oooh! I almost forgot to tell you what I look like. Well, here goes—try to picture me as best you can with this description:

Eyes of blue, light hair, age fifteen and loves all sports, (indoor and out.) I also like music with pep, dancing, hiking, reading and writing. I can play a victrola and electric player with plenty of nickles to work it with.

TOMMY.

H. Laverner,
R. F. D. No. 3,
Hempstead, L. I.

A BRITISH TOMMY

Dear Editor:

Having read about your club, Trail's End, in Ranch Romances, and also hearing of it from my chum who received a letter from you, I wish to beg the privilege of becoming a member.

I have been asked by a friend, who is in the hospital and unable to write himself, to put his name forward for membership. He is Pvt. A. W. Wood, No. 5246-725, the rest of the address being the same as mine.

At present our battalion is in India but we proceed to China on the 19th of October.

I wonder if any of your girl readers would like to correspond with my friend or myself, we could swap experiences, and for us it would break the monotony of army life.

Sincerely,
Pvt. W. H. PETERS.

7841040
Sig. Sect. H. G. Wing,
1st. Worcestershire Regt.,
Western Road Camp,
Shanghai, China.

MILLIONS OF PALS WANTED

Dear Editor:

I have been reading R. R. for over three months now and think it the most wonderful book I have read. Please, dear Editor, publish my letter so I can get millions of pen pals; won't everybody in the whole world write to me? I promise to be a true pal to you all. I am "sweet sixteen," have dark wavy hair and brown eyes, also a dimple on my right cheek and one that is bashful on the left. I go to a prep school now and intend to go to college next year. I am the youngest girl at our school. Well, I presume I am saying too much. I promise to write to everyone no matter who or what they are, and how old they are, nothing matters as long as you all write to me. I will also exchange snaps.

Sincerely yours,
"SIS"

c/o Our Air Mail.

P. S. Won't Lonesome Bill, Lonely Don, "Flash," and Holly Wood write to me?

IS IT FAIR, PALS?

Dear Editor:

Perhaps I'll have better luck in getting my second letter printed, than I did with my first. I realize that there must be hundreds ahead of me, but I am still hoping for a break.

I have answered at least six of the letters in your department, and have had no reply to any of them. I think it is hardly fair for them to ask for pen pals and solemnly promise to answer all letters received and then not even acknowledge that they have re-

MAIL

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I never read any other mag except yours, the R. R.

I am a lover of the West and horses.

I am a young girl, my age will be 20 years in 1930. Have long, light brown hair, and dark gray eyes.

I am a cowgirl and I only had just a little bit of experience in the West.

I want to make friends with your readers. I want to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of my town.

I see in our Air Mail that there is a flying cowboy who wants pen pals. I want to be one of his pen pals. Will he write to me? Also, would like to hear from Lone Wolf John.

From your champion reader,

JESSIE (THE COWGIRL)

Miss Jessie C. Tomko,
309 Olivia St.,
McKees Rocks, Pa.

TROT OUT YOUR PHOTO!

Dear Editor:

This is the third time I have sent R. R. an appeal for pen pals, but I never seem to get printed in your wonderful mag. It's the best ever. I hope everybody snaps out of it (young or old) and writes me a letter. I'll even exchange snapshots, so you better all write.

Oooh! I almost forgot to tell you what I look like. Well, here goes—try to picture me as best you can with this description:

Eyes of blue, light hair, age fifteen and loves all sports, (indoor and out.) I also like music with pep, dancing, hiking, reading and writing. I can play a victrola and electric player with plenty of nickles to work it with.

TOMMY.

H. Laverner,
R. F. D. No. 8,
Hempstead, L. I.

A BRITISH TOMMY

Dear Editor:

Having read about your club, Trail's End, in Ranch Romances, and also hearing of it from my chum who received a letter from you, I wish to beg the privilege of becoming a member.

I have been asked by a friend, who is in the hospital and unable to write himself, to put his name forward for membership. He is Pvt. A. W. Wood, No. 5246-725, the rest of the address being the same as mine.

At present our battalion is in India but we proceed to China on the 19th of October.

I wonder if any of your girl readers would like to correspond with my friend or myself, we could swap experiences, and for us it would break the monotony of army life.

Sincerely,
Pvt. W. H. PETERS.

7841040
Sig. Sect. H. G. Wing,
1st. Worcestershire Regt.,
Western Road Camp,
Shanghai, China.

MILLIONS OF PALS WANTED

Dear Editor:

I have been reading R. R. for over three months now and think it the most wonderful book I have read. Please, dear Editor, publish my letter so I can get millions of pen pals; won't everybody in the whole world write to me? I promise to be a true pal to you all. I am "sweet sixteen," have dark wavy hair and brown eyes, also a dimple on my right cheek and one that is bashful on the left. I go to a prep school now and intend to go to college next year. I am the youngest girl at our school. Well, I presume I am saying too much. I promise to write to everyone no matter who or what they are, and how old they are, nothing matters as long as you all write to me. I will also exchange snaps.

Sincerely yours,
"SIS"

c/o Our Air Mail.

P. S. Won't Lonesome Bill, Lonely Don, "Flash," and Holly Wood write to me?

IS IT FAIR, PALS?

Dear Editor:

Perhaps I'll have better luck in getting my second letter printed, than I did with my first. I realize that there must be hundreds ahead of me, but I am still hoping for a break.

I have answered at least six of the letters in your department, and have had no reply to any of them. I think it is hardly fair for them to ask for pen pals and solemnly promise to answer all letters received and then not even acknowledge that they have re-

ceived a line. I had no better luck in getting answers from the boys than I did from the girls. I hope that if any I've written to, see this letter, they'll have a guilty conscience.

I'm going to try a couple more letters, and if they are unanswered, and this one unprinted, I am going to be rightfully disappointed. Considering the fact that I now am a member of the Trail's End Club, I think that I ought to get a reply to this. I received my pin a short time ago, and am delighted with it.

I love the R. R. stories but always turn to the Air Mail Dept. first.

If any lonesome person sees this, please answer it. I love to write letters. My name and address are being withheld at my request; but will be given to those who care to answer this.

A GREEN MOUNTAIN MAID.

c/o Our Air Mail.

AN AIR MAIL FAN

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of the R. R. and love it, especially Our Air Mail. I have written before and my letter was printed but I'm not discouraged yet. Won't somebody write to me? I have light brown hair, blue eyes and love all kinds of sports. Will exchange snapshots with anybody who cares to. Well, here's hoping this goes into print very soon and best luck to R. R.

I remain,

ELEANOR TEETZ.

82 Saratoga Blvd.,
Gloversville, N. Y.

SMILING SUE

Dear Editor:

As this is my second attempt to get in on Our Air Mail page, I think I ought to get in this time. Have read your mag., for over two years and think the R. R. can't be beaten.

I also, am coming to you for a plea for pen pals. If "Flying Cowboy" and "Dave Abbott" want pen pals, please write to me, also many others and I will answer all. Will also exchange snapshots.

I am 24 years old, have brown eyes and wavy hair.

Wishing the R. R. good luck and through it, many pen pals.

SMILING SUE.

Susan Ruppert,
Currie, Minn., Route 2.

MARRIED FOLKS, AHOY!

Dear Editor:

How is it I never see any letters from Wisconsin? And never a letter from a married couple? It seems us if they were afraid to write.

I sure would like to hear from married folks. My hubby would too. We're both gun cranks. Don't know anything extra about 'em but we have quite a number of 'em at that. Will exchange snapshots and real letters. Especially from people in Canada. We like Canadians.

Let's hear from married folks now. Let your "budget" lay idle this evening and write to us.

Give R. R. a cheer or two and good luck thrown in.

BOB AND MARIE WARSHKOW.

400 Depot St.,
Oconto Falls, Wis.

P. S. Why doesn't Estelle De La Torre drop a line, at least?

HERE'S ADVENTURE

Dear Editor:

I wrote you two letters before, but I haven't seen one printed in Ranch Romances yet. Now I've enlisted in the army. Please print this letter, for I want some pen pals, and I will be very glad to tell anyone anything about the Merchant Marine. I was a sailor for six years and traveled almost all over the world. England, France, Germany, Spain, Algiers, Gibraltar, Portugal, Argentine, Uruguay, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, Guatamala, Japan, China, Philippine Islands, India, Egypt, Honolulu, Alaska, Mexico and Canada. Also extensively over the U. S. A. I'm an ex-cowboy, ex-miner, ex-sailor, and in about 2½ years I'll be an ex-soldier. Please print this letter, I want pen pals so badly. I am 21 years old. Brown hair, hazel eyes, fair complexion.

Please don't fail me, old-timer.

Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM F. JONES.

2nd Signal Co.,
Radio Section,
Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

A TOUCHING PLEA FOR PALS

Dear Editor:

This is my second letter to you. Won't you please find a tiny corner for it in Our Air Mail? I won't try to tell you what stories I like best, for I like them all.

I am very lonesome for I have to be home quite a lot as I keep house for Dad. Now, some of you boys and girls between 16 and 35 please write everything you can think of. As for me, I am a sophomore at Hilton High, sixteen years of age, have copper-colored hair and blue eyes. Not so terribly bad looking but what I'll exchange snaps with anyone who sends them.

I am making this as short as I can so I'll not take up your time.

I'll move along so the next one may find room.

Sincerely yours,

"WINKIE."

(Miss) Winifred Skutt.
Hilton, N. Y.

PAGING SOME PALS

Dear Editor:

Have just finished reading Ranch Romances, and I think they are better than ever.

First of all I want pen pals, and plenty of them, the more, the better, because I would like to have many American pals. Most of all, I promise to answer every letter I receive. I am very fond of talkies, books and football, football being something like your game. I am eighteen, have brown hair and eyes.

So come along, pen pals, tell me something about yourselves and your country (and I hope you'll fill my post bag) because I would very much like to be with you. I would like to join Trail's End Club because, having a cycle I have seen a lot of England, mostly by camping out.

Wishing good luck and success to Ranch Romances.

Yours sincerely,

EDGAR AVALLAND.

101 Barkworth Road,
S. Bermondsey, London, S. E. 6, England.

P. S. I would like Virginia Lee of R. F. D. No. 3. Columbus, Ga., and Trixie, c/o Our Air Mail, to write to me.

FROM THE REAL WEST

Dear Editor:

I live near the place where Jesse James and his followers lived and died.

I have read your R. R. ever since it was first published, and am interested in your Trail's End Club and would like to become a member.

I am twenty years old, have brown hair, and blue eyes.

Would like to hear from anybody, girls or boys.

Hoping to see this in print very soon and to receive lots of letters from your readers, I am,

Sincerely yours,

THELMA PAGE.

Malta Bend, Mo.
c/o Wm. Furness, Fleet No. 2.

WRITE HIM AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for over a year, and I don't think it can be beat for good clean stories of the West.

I am a boy seventeen years of age, almost 6 feet tall, my eyes and hair are brown, and I sure am tanned by the old Illinois sun.

Now all you boys and girls that want a real pen pal just write and see what happens. I can tell a lot about Central Illinois.

This is my second plea for pen pals so I hope that I shall succeed.

I remain a R. R. booster,

EVERETT M. MEADOWS.

Clinton, Illinois.
R. R. 1.

A LONELY COWPOKE

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely cowpoke who would like to have some pen pals from all over the U. S. A. and Canada.

I have been reading your mag. for two years now, and I find it is very interesting.

I have black curly hair, gray eyes, and tan complexion. I hope to hear from both young and old.

So some of you please write to a lonesome waddy of the Wyoming range.

THE RAMBLING KID OF AMERICA.

Jack Malo, c/o J. S. Murphy,
St. Joe Route, Basin, Wyo.

LONESOME

Dear Editor:

Gee, I hope I am lucky this time. As this is my second plea for pen pals, won't you print my letter in the Ranch Romances magazine?

I've been reading Ranch Romances for over two years and surely like its stories. I wish it was published weekly instead of semi-monthly.

Won't everyone write to a very lonesome girl? I promise to answer every letter I receive. Honest.

Now for myself: I'm eighteen years of age, have brown, curly hair and gray eyes. I'll exchange snapshots with all who care to answer my plea.

More power to Ranch Romances. Please, won't everyone write to me?

LONESOME.

Miss Ruth Archer,
1128 So. Court Ent.,
Visalia, Calif.

SOMEBODY PLEASE WRITE

Dear Editor:

I have read Ranch Romances for three months and it's like a hard-boiled egg—can't be beat!

I would like to hear from pen pals.

I have black, curly hair and brown eyes. I am 17 years old and I am in the Kelso High School.

Won't somebody please write to:

LONESOME BLACKIE.

(Miss) Helen Eldred,
Kelso, Washington,
R 2, Box 252.

ALICE NEEDS SOME MORE PALS

Dear Editor:

I am just a-wondering if you could find me a few pen pals through your magazine.

I have written to so many pen pals, but so far have only three to keep me busy.

I love the great outdoors, so I am eager to hear from friends from the open spaces.

I am 28 years old and have auburn hair and gray eyes.

I will tell all the fans that do me the favor of writing all about our great city.

Sincerely,

2108 Maple Ave., ALICE SMITH.
Los Angeles, Calif.

HERE'S CALIFORNIA VIOLET

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping all the boys and girls write to me. Everyone. Come on you cowboys, cowgirls, sailors, soldiers, aviators or what have you. I promise to exchange snaps with anyone, and want letters, so please fill my mail box.

I suppose a description is due you. Well, here goes: I have blue eyes, light brown hair, fair complexion and am 21 years old.

I hail from sunny California and can tell you something about my state.

My hobby is writing letters. But I like dancing, driving a car, reading good books, hiking, camping etc. Also play piano and accordion a little. I guess I've taken up enough of your time as it is so will say adios hoping I will see this in print soon and that you boys and girls will use your pens or pencils and scribble me a line.

With best wishes to the pen pals and the best magazine on the market, I will say,

Adios,

CALIFORNIA VIOLET.

Violet Souza,
Centerville, Calif.,
P. O. Box 49.

R. R. GOES ALONG WITH THE FLEET

Dear Editor:

Here's another youngster who wants to get some pen pals.

Have been reading R. R. for over a year. Never miss a copy even when the fleet goes South for winter maneuvers. Had one of the newsstands send me the magazine.

Am a radio man in Uncle Sam's navy with lots of time to write letters. There are a few incidents in my experience that would make good stories.

I have auburn hair and brown eyes.

Will someone please write me a few lines? Won't promise to answer every letter, but will answer as many as possible.

Sincerely,

HARMON P. ALDERMAN.

Flag Division, U. S. S. Antares,
c/o Port Master, N. Y.

LIKES BOAT TRIPS

Dear Editor:

This is my second trial, and I hope it works:

I think that the double "R" makes lots of friends, but I haven't seen any yet. Those that I write to don't seem to answer any of my letters, so I have decided to let them write to me first.

I'm sweet sixteen and never been kissed, maybe, and have brown hair and blue eyes.

I am one of the so-called weaker sex, who is very much interested in aviation and horses. I also like long boat trips, so if anyone agrees with my ideas, I wish they would write to me.

I am also saving stamps, especially foreign, so anyone who has some extra ones, send them along.

Get your pens out, gents, and write to me. I will answer positively every letter I receive.

Wishing the mag lots of success and more copies, also more members in Our Air Mail,

Sincerely,

Margaret Lovitt, MARGARET LOVITT
3640 Tracy Ave.,
Kansas City, Missouri.

R. R. GOES OVER BIG

Dear Editor:

Have been reading Ranch Romances for over a year and it sure goes over big in the Station Hospital.

When I buy a copy everybody wants one. I am 18 years of age and dark complexioned and have blue eyes and brown hair.

Would like to hear from pen pals all over the good old U. S. A.

I remain yours,

TOM.

Private Thomas Ostrowski,
Station Hospital,
Fort George G. Meade, Maryland.

HER HEART ACHES FOR PEN PALS

Dear Editor:

It's gosh-awful hard to sit in a large town all day and do nothing when you have lived on a 6,000-acre ranch all of your life. I want pen pals and I promise to answer all of them. I have traveled all over and sure can spiel a good yarn.

I love the old West, but I sure do like to travel on the sea, so I sure wish all of the sailors in the navy would write to me and the rest of the Trail's End members are sure welcome to write too. Here is me: Gray eyes, brown hair, and a small heartache for pen pals, so please write. Here is to the best mag. in the world, Double R.

Your booster,

Helene Buell, BOBBY.
Gen. Del., Spokane, Wash.

HOW ABOUT IT, WESTERNERS?

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances magazine faithfully for two years and must say it is the best magazine published.

I am also interested in Our Air Mail Department.

This is my second letter and I hope I'm successful.

Am a young girl, seventeen years old. I have light brown hair and dark brown eyes.

I would like to hear from just everywhere, but my greatest delight would be to hear from a Westerner.

Wishing the R. R. mag. the best of luck, I am,

"CONNIE."

Miss Anne Vlack,
2456 So. Avers Ave., Chicago, Ill.

SHE'LL ALWAYS READ RANCH

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of the R. R. Magazine and I have been reading it for nearly three years. Also, I will continue to read it as long as it is published. When I get the R. R. Magazine the first thing I do is to read Our Air Mail.

I am just a nice girl who is longing for pen pals. Probably if I describe myself some of you boys and girls who read Our Air Mail will take an interest in me and will write. I have blue eyes, black wavy hair.

I like to swim, dance, skate, ride or almost anything. So please, won't someone get busy and scrawl me a line or two? I promise to answer every letter I get.

Well, here's hoping,

KID BOOTS.

Miss Ray Van Cleve,
3941 Vermont St.,
San Diego, Calif.

P. S.—I liked "Square Shooters," by Paul Overman, and "The Law Takes a Kiss," by Clee Woods. Let's have some more like them!

BY PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

JANUARY

AQUARIUS

AQUARIUS is the sign under which those born after January twentieth belong.

Persons born under this sign are naturally endowed with possibilities, but they usually require a strong incentive to force them into action. When great occasions arise and they become thoroughly aroused, they show wonderful strength of purpose, and when they feel convinced that the stand they have taken or the method they have adopted is correct, no amount of reasoning or persuasion will induce them to change. They are earnest students of human nature, and are not easily deceived by outside appearances; while they have a genuinely fraternal feeling for all mankind and the desire to lighten the load oppressing humanity, their sympathies must be engaged through an exposition of actual necessity.

They are very radical in their opinions, always questioning and departing from accepted standards of belief; skeptical in all matters which cannot be logically demonstrated; reason from a purely intellectual and material point of view; suppress any intuition and always endeavor to explain the supernatural in the most commonplace, matter-of-fact sort of way.

The women are generally beautiful, fond of luxuries, dress well, and have taste in decorating their homes. They are ideal companions, great home lovers, intensely moved by music, lively in company, but gloomy when alone. The men are idealistic.

Aquarius finds its most congenial conjugal partner in its own sign, but Aries and Sagittarius could also mean happiness.

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Address .....

Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date.....

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This is a simple and understandable policy—without red-tape or misleading clauses. You know exactly what every word means—and every word means exactly what it says.

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WHAT WE DO—On arrival of order we open 10-Month Charge Account and send article for 15-day trial. Convince yourself of value offered. If satisfied, pay balance in ten equal monthly payments. Otherwise, return and $1.00 will be promptly refunded.

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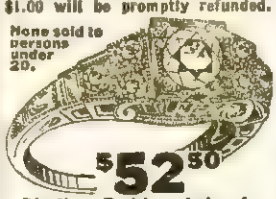

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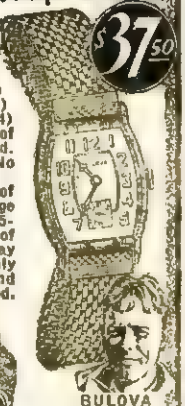

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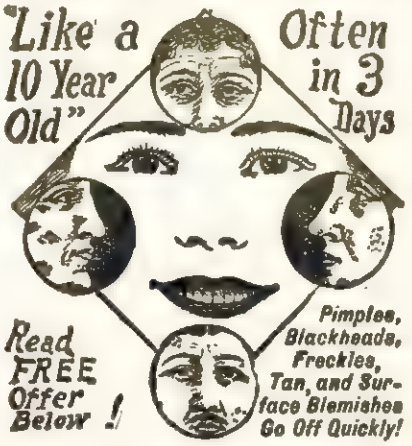
A NEW SKIN

INSTEAD OF AN UGLY FACE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Tobacco Habit BANISHED

Let Us Help You

Stop craving tobacco in any form. Tobacco Redeemer in most cases relieves all craving for it in a few days' time. Don't try to quit the tobacco habit unaided. It's often a losing fight against heavy odds, and may mean a distressing shock to the nervous system. Let Tobacco Redeemer help the habit to quit you. Tobacco users can depend upon this help by simply using Tobacco Redeemer according to simple directions. It is pleasant to use, acts quickly, and is thoroughly reliable.

Not a Substitute

Tobacco Redeemer contains no habit-forming drugs of any kind. It is in no sense a substitute for tobacco. After finishing the treatment, there should be no desire to use tobacco again or to continue the use of the remedy. In case the treatment is not perfectly satisfactory, we will gladly refund any money paid. It makes not a particle of difference how long tobacco has been used, how much it is used, or in what form—whether it is cigars, cigarettes, pipe, plug, fine cut or snuff. In most cases, Tobacco Redeemer removes all craving for tobacco in any form in a very few days. And remember, it is offered with a positive money-back guarantee.

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With compass. Guaranteed 2 years. Money back if not pleased. Sells for $1.25

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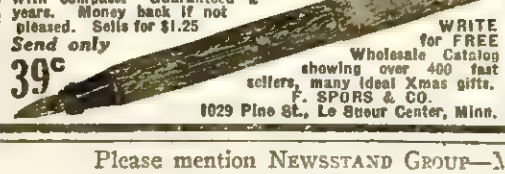

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It may be in the neck, back, hips, stomach, liver, legs or arms. Wherever it is, the chart will help to show you the location and cause of your ailment. For instance, this chart will help you locate vermiform appendix pains. Hundreds of lives might have been saved if people had known the location and character of the pain and had received proper attention.

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By Relieving the Cause with

Violet Ray – Vibration
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The Four Greatest Curative Powers Generated by This

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Elco Health Generators at last are ready for you! If you want more health—greater power to enjoy the pleasures and delights about you, or if more beauty is your desire—*write!* Ask for the book on these inventions which has just been prepared. It will be sent to you without cost. It tells you how Elco Health Generators aid you in leaving the lethargy and hopelessness of bad health and weakness behind forever. Re-vitalize yourself. Bring back energy. Be wholly alive. Write today!

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If Asthma is getting the best of you and is slowly tearing down your health, I want you to try a treatment that saved me from a life of torture and agony, after everything else, even Doctors, failed to help me. I could not get life insurance because I was considered hopeless. But this treatment performed a miracle in my case. Within 24 hours I could lie down and sleep in comfort all night long. All choking and wheezing stopped almost instantly. It is really astonishing how quickly I got well and I have not had an attack since. My recovery was so complete I had no trouble in getting my life insured for Ten Thousand Dollars. The Doctor could not find even a trace of Asthma. I will prove this by a sworn affidavit from the Doctor who examined me. Now I want to help every one suffering the torture and agony of Asthma attacks. If your condition is the same as mine was, this treatment may afford you the same relief. I will gladly send a generous free trial treatment to every sufferer who will write for it. If anything you have tried has given you only temporary relief, write me today for a free trial of my treatment and proof that I got rid of Asthma after suffering six years. Remember the trial treatment is free. Write today. O. W. Dean, 2602 Dean Bldg., Benton Harbor, Mich.

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KEELEY Treatment For *Tobacco Habit* Successful For Over 50 Years

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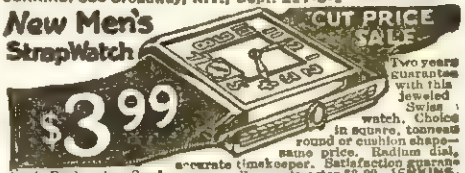
New Men's Strap Watch $3.99



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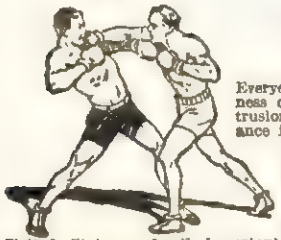
A Fight Against Rupture



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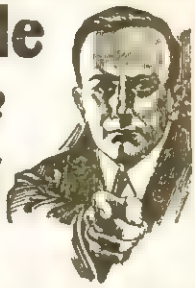
Get Groceries at Wholesale —and Make $15 a Day Besides!



YES, right now, I'll give you groceries at rock-bottom wholesale prices and a chance to pocket $10 to $15 cash profits in a day. I'll give you the same proposition I gave L. C. Van Allen, of Illinois, who reports profits of more than $100 a week. You don't need any experience. Gustave Karnath, a farm laborer in Minnesota, writes, "Made $20.35 the first 5 hours." Mrs. B. F. Bagmell, of Louisiana, says she makes $10 to $15 a day in spare time. And I now offer you the chance to make money and save money on groceries that I gave these people.

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NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED

You don't need capital, training or experience. All you do is call on your friends and my established customers and take care of their orders. I never sell to stores. *You alone get the profit on all orders from your territory.* Keep your present job and start with me in spare time if you want to. Oscar Stuart, of W. Virginia, reports $18 profit in 2½ hours' spare time.

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The Old Reliable Original Credit Jewelers
Largest in the World

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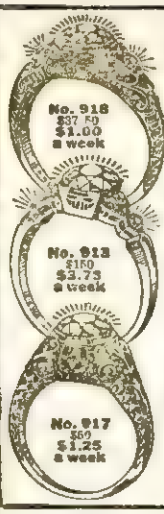

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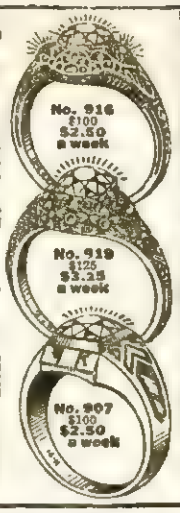

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Makes cigarette smoking safe.
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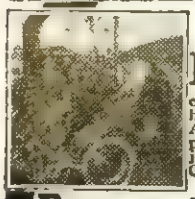

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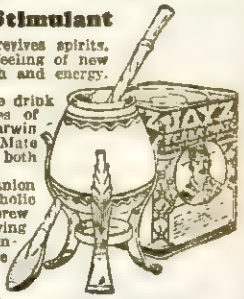

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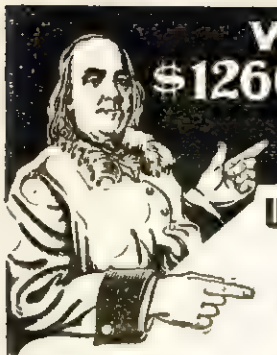

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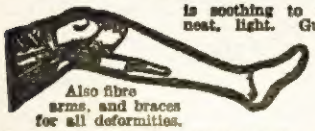

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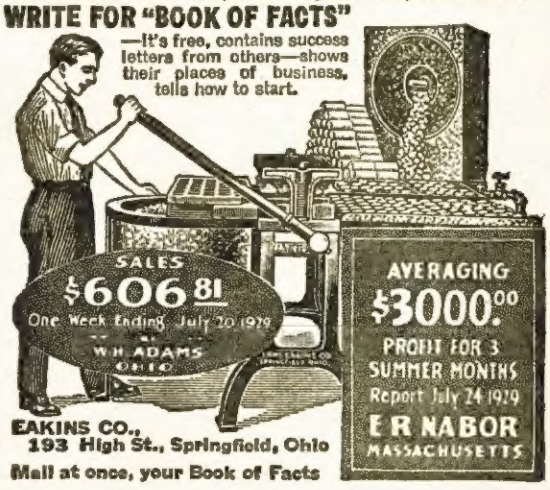

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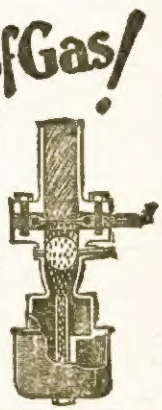

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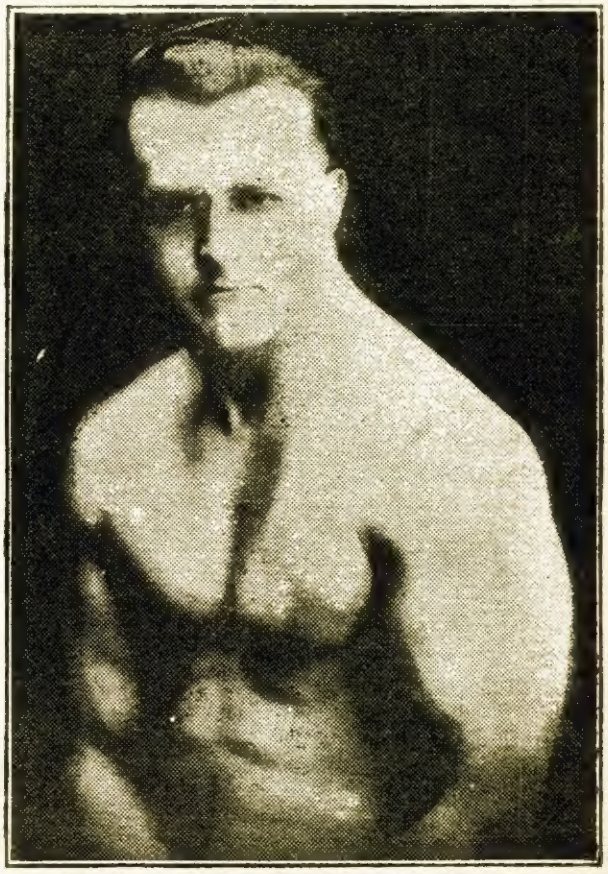

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